# A History of Syriac Christianity, Part I

# By Heleen Murre-van den Berg



Dr. Murre-van den Berg presented a series of six lectures at ETSC during the period January 16-19, 2019. Below is the first of three installments of these lectures, which have been edited for conciseness and clarity. She is professor of Eastern Christianity and director of the Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at Radboud University Nigmegen.

#### Introduction

oday we begin a six-part lecture series that will discuss the early Syriac churches. I will begin with the period starting from the second century, which is when Syriac Christianity emerges, and continue through the rise of Islam. And tomorrow we will continue from

there. But before I begin with the early history of the churches, I would like to say a few things about Syriac Studies as an academic field. In the past, most people came to Syriac studies from the field of theology because in the Syriac tradition there are many interesting sources about the history of the Bible, about early Christianity, and much discussion of theology. The Syriac tradition has much to say to all of these fields of study. We will touch on all that in the coming classes.

Syriac studies have also drawn researchers from the field of linguistics, especially those interested in Aramaic. This is a very important language. If we compare Semitic languages, Aramaic is a big language with a long history and with many different branches. So Aramaic is a very important language to study if one wants to study Arabic, Hebrew, and the Ethiopian languages. Syriac, as one of the best documented Aramaic languages, is one of the crucial languages to understand if one wants to study Semitic linguistics.

#### **Syriac Studies: intersection fields**

Tradition based

- Biblical Studies
- World Christianity/ intercultural theology/ ecumenical theology. Orthodox studies
- Linguistics and philology: Syriac as part of Semitic studies, within which Aramaic plays an important role Area based
- History
- Religious Studies/Anthropology
- Area Studies
   Themes: theology,
   interreligious and
   interdenominational
   encounters language, identity
   and nationalism

**Insert 1** 

The study of the Syriac language and Syriac communities is also important for those interested in studying the history of the Middle East, not only for the period of the early church but also for the modern period that sees the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, historians and anthropologists interested in the Middle East have become interested in Syriac studies. I will try to touch a little on all of this to share some of what I find so exciting about Syriac studies.

# Lecture One A History of Early Syriac Christianity A.D. 200 to 700

Let's begin by looking at Syriac Christianity as part of the history of the churches of the Middle East. Some of you will no doubt be very much at home with this material and even find it repetitious, but for others it may be entirely new. When we talk about the churches of the Middle East, we usually organize them in the way that you see in the chart (see insert 2). This shows that there are three main groups: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant.

We usually divide the Orthodox into two groups: the Eastern Orthodox and what we now call the Oriental Orthodox. The term *Eastern Orthodox* denotes the churches that are related to Constantinople and are the inheritors of the Byzantine tradition. In the Middle East it has three major patriarchates: Antioch, which is the church of Syria and the Levant; Jerusalem, which is very small but, of course, very important; and Alexandria, which is in Egypt but a very small church compared to the Coptic Church (which also emerged out of the patriarchate of Alexandria). As you can see from the chart, there is no independent Syriac church within the

### Syriac Christianity as part of the history of the churches of the Middle East

#### Orthodox

- Eastern Orthodox
  - Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria
- Oriental Orthodox
  - **Syriac**, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean
  - (Assyrian [Nestorian]) Church of the East

#### Catholic

- Roman Catholic
- Maronite
- **■** Chaldean
- **■** Syriac Catholic
- Armenian, Coptic, Greek Catholic

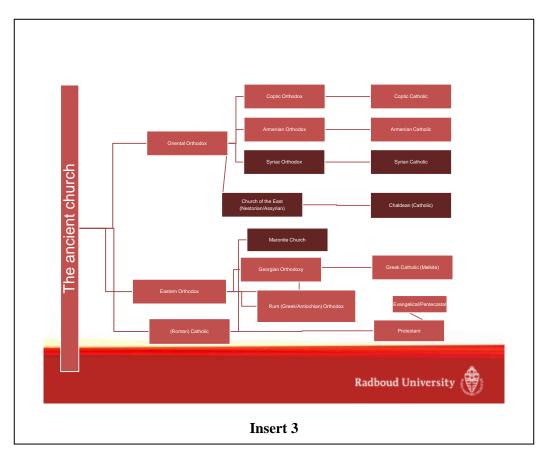
#### **Protestant**

■ Evangelical/Pentecostal/Charismatic Insert 2

The Syriac Churches mostly appear in the category of the Oriental Churches, and the most important one is the Syriac Orthodox Church. Other groups in this tradition include the Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, and Eritreans. There is also a group that cannot be put into this category very easily. It is what we now call the Assyrian Church of the East, which used to be called the Nestorian Church of the East. We will also return to examine this church in greater detail in a later lecture.

Eastern Orthodox tradition.

And finally we have the Catholic churches, and among them is the Syriac Catholic churches. We will review all of these in greater detail in a later lecture. For now, let me just make a few comments about them. The most important one is the Maronite Church, which has close links to the Syriac tradition. The Chaldeans are the Catholic counterpart to the Church of the East.



The Syriac Catholics are the Catholic variety of the Syriac Orthodox. And of course there are also Syriac Christians among the Protestants – people who come from the Syriac tradition and have joined a Protestant denomination but, except for a few places, do not have separate churches. I have organized the same churches in another chart (see insert 3), but this time they appear in historical order from left to right. So here we begin with the ancient church that

roughly split into three groups, which we just talked about. Sometime later this breaks down in to a variety of new churches: the Syriac, Armenian and Coptic Orthodox; the Church of the East; the Maronite and some others; and then in a still later period, the Catholics.

In this class we will do a historical overview of the Syriac churches. We will start with early Christianity and the Byzantine period. In the next class we will talk about the Islamic period – the



Early Christianity: Greek, Roman, non-Greek, non-Roman: within, on and over the borders of the Roman Empire

Insert 4

Umayyad, Abbasid, and Mongols. Then we'll spend two classes on the Ottoman period as the nineteenth century is very important to an understanding of the transformation of Christianity from old forms to what we see today. During the fifth class, we will examine the twentieth century in the Middle East, and in the last class we will consider these communities as they are spread across the world.

# Syriac History: Periodization (& Classes)

#### Class I

- Early Christianity (-350)
- East Roman/Byzantine (350-661)

#### Class II

- Ummayad (661-750), Abbasid (750-1258), Mongol (1258-137)
- (Among others: Zara Qoyunlu (1386-1467)

#### Class III& IV

Ottoman (1512-1923) – with special attention to the 19<sup>th</sup> c., until 1923

#### Class V

 Mandates/Interwar period (1923-1945), 3independent Arab states (1945-today

#### Class VI

Contemporary transnational communities

#### **Insert 5**

Okay. Let's begin. I often use this map (see insert 4) with my students in the Netherlands because many European students are not at all aware that, in the period of early Christianity, the bulk of the Christian population was in the Middle East. So that they would not know that, even though by the second century there were already Christians in what is now Europe, the majority of Christians would be in the East. And of course the map is not inclusive because there were also Christians in Ethiopia and Sudan. Syriac Christianity started in the area of Southeastern Turkey, Turkey-Syria, and what is now North Iraq and Persia.

The city of Edessa is where we are sure that Syriac Christianity existed at a very early date. Edessa is known under various names: Osrhoene is one of the names used in Roman sources; in Arabic it is ar-Ruha, in Syriac Urhay, and Urfa (Sanliurfa) is how it appears in Turkish sources and how it is known today. In Edessa we know that for the first time Syriac was written. But it was not yet

#### Christian.

What we see here (see insert 6) is a mosaic that is not yet Christian. It is from the grave of a rich woman. On the left you see Syriac writing, which was usually written from top to bottom, especially in inscriptions. We know that in Edessa and its environs people used this kind of writing and this kind of script, but there is nothing specifically Christian about it. Very soon after this, we have Syria sources telling us about the history of Christianity in that place. And after that we do not see Syriac texts that are not Christian. So apparently these groups converted to Christianity and used this language, which increasingly was a written language. It was used as the language of the church and for the type of things that concerned them. It became very popular. At the same time, Christians from the surrounding area, who probably spoke a type of Aramaic similar to that appearing in the mosaic, also started to use Syriac as their written language.

One of the most important early texts we have in Syriac, which in its current form is from the early fifth century, is the *Teaching of Addai*, which includes the so-called Abgar legend. A very interesting text about Christianity in Edessa that tries to prove its apostolic credentials, it tells us that the inhabitants of Edessa converted to Christianity in the first century because of an exchange of letters between Jesus and King Abgar. There is no proof of the authenticity of this story, but it suggests that Christianity has ancient roots in this area and that people cherished the story. The fourth-century Church historian Eusebius tells the same story, though in a different version.

One of the interesting things about the legend is that it includes the detail that Jesus' disciples sent an image of Jesus to Edessa. According to the tradition, there are two versions of the image. One is a painted image (by Hannan, the emissary of Abgar), while the other is an impression of his face (see insert 7). Some believed that the latter was necessary since it would not be possible to paint Jesus' image as no artist could capture his features. Since he could not be painted, an impression of his face was made instead. The Image of



Pre-Christian mosaic from Edessa.

- Edessa was a very important place for Syriac Christianity, especially because of first indication of Syriac language/script (1st century non-Christian!)
- (Aramaic to Classical Syriac)
- Abgar legend pat of later "DoctrinaAddai" (apostolic origins etc. early 5<sup>th</sup> century)
- Letters, Eusebius, mandylion to Turin shroud

**Insert 6** 

Edessa is generally known as the Holy Mandylion (cloth or towel). Some have even suggested a connection to the famous Shroud of Turin, but it is more likely these are in fact two separate stories.





King Abgar of Edessa holding the Holy Mandylion. Left, St. Catherine's Monastery, 10<sup>th</sup> century; right, a contemporary version

**Insert 7** 

One of the interesting things about the legend is that it includes the detail that Jesus' disciples sent an image of Jesus to Edessa. According to the tradition, there are two versions of the image. One is a painted image (by Hannan, the emissary of Abgar), while the other is an impression of his face (see insert 7). Some believed that the latter was necessary since it would not be possible to paint Jesus' image as no artist could capture his features. Since he could not be painted, an impression of his face was made instead. The Image of Edessa is generally known as the Holy Mandylion (cloth or towel). Some have even suggested a connection to the famous Shroud of Turin, but it is more likely these are in fact two separate stories.

Another early center of Christianity in the East is Adiabene, whose capital was Arbela,

(present-day Erbil in Northern Iraq). What Erbil shows is that from the beginning there was a connection to Judaism. Many of the first converts to Christianity were Jews living in the Roman Empire. It's a very interesting story. In Erbil, in Adiabene, we know the royal house had converted to Judaism in the early first century. Queen Helena in the first century converted to Judaism and moved to Jerusalem, where she was buried and where her grave can still be found. This Palestinian connection may have opened the way for Christianity to be introduced into Erbil about 150 years after her death. Notably, there is a Syriac community in Erbil (Ankawa) even today.

A third very important place was Nusaybin, also known by the Greek version of its name, *Nisibis*. It flourished as a Syriac Christian center especially in the late fifth and sixth centuries. It is one of the very few places whose early church building still stands. The one found there (see insert 8) probably dates from the sixth century. Already in the fourth century, Nusaybin housed a medical and theological school which the Syrians had to give up when the Persians captured the city in 363. The school was later moved to Edessa. However, in the late fifth century, Nusaybin once again became a center of learning after the school in Edessa was closed in the aftermath of the Christological discussions. Nusaybin is just on the border of present-day Syria and Turkey.



Syrian church fromsixth-century Nusaybin (Nisibis).

- Bilingual Greek/Aramaic communities in the Levant
- Early Aramaic centers in the East Adiabene, Edessa, later also "Persia" (Seleucia Ctesiphon)
- Building upon local Hellenistic/Aramaic & Jewish linguistic cultures
- Early spread to India :Thomas Christians"
- Part of loose network of churches, different theological positions.

**Insert 8** 

A third very important place was Nusaybin, also known by the Greek version of its name, *Nisibis*. It flourished as a Syriac Christian center especially in the late fifth and sixth centuries. It is one of the very few places whose early church building still stands. The one found there (see insert 8) probably dates from the sixth century. Already in the fourth century, Nusaybin housed a medical and theological school which the Syrians had to give up when the Persians captured the city in 363. The school was later moved to Edessa. However, in the late fifth century, Nusaybin once again became a center of learning after the school in Edessa was closed in the aftermath of the Christological discussions. Nusaybin is just on the border of present-day Syria and Turkey.

I have been stressing the Syriac-Aramaic aspect of these churches, but in this early period, Greek would still have been very much part of the cultural world. There would not yet have been a great a distinction between these two language groups, and many of these early churches would still be using Greek. Probably ordinary people could only speak Aramaic, but the priests and monks would know some Greek and would be in touch with what was happening in the western part of the Middle East.

An interesting question is, when did Syriac Christianity spread to India? The answer is that we don't know. But we do know that sometime in the third and fourth centuries there were Syriac-speaking Christians in India. Some of you may know the story of St. Thomas traveling to India to convert Indians. This story, again, is difficult to prove, but it does seem that there were Syriac churches established there quite early that have survived in some form down to the present. Another thing to stress is that the early Syriac church straddled two empires. Parts of the church flourished in the Roman Empire, such as Edessa; but other parts were in the Persian Empire, like Nisibis and Erbel.

#### **Early Syriac Texts/authors**

- Hymn of the Pearl (Acts of Thomas)
- Odes of Salomon (2<sup>nd</sup> c?) (Liturgical? Poetry
- Tatian (c. 120-180) Diatesseron –
- Bardaisan (154-222?) *Dialogues*, among which: *Book of the Law of the Countries*, hymns

#### **Insert 9**

Before we continue with this history, let's have a look at inserts 9 and 10, which concern the early production of classical Syriac texts. The texts in slide 9 have been transmitted in the Christian Syriac tradition but were not necessarily conceived within that tradition. Let's look at the first two, the "Hymn of the Pearl" and the "Odes of Salomon." "The Hymn of the Pearl" is part of the Acts of Thomas, but most researchers think that the text is older than that of Acts. Probably neither the

"Hymn of the Pearl" nor the "Odes of Salomon" were originally even Christian texts, though they may have originated in a Jewish or gnostic milieu. They were incorporated later into Christian literature because they fitted so well into Syriac Christianity.

The next text is Tatian's Diatesseron, which is the four gospels woven into one story. A very popular Gospel version of the early church, many translations have been made of it, and it has been the subject of numerous commentaries. Later on, the church decided to stop using this text in its liturgy. Today there is no church that uses this version of the gospel story. Ephrem, one of the greatest authors of the period, wrote a commentary on the Diatesseron. It is still important to scholars though it was used in the Syriac churches only for a brief period.

Then we have Bardaisan, another early author in Classical Syriac. A special figure in the history of Syriac Christianity, he wrote a very interesting text, *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, which combines a kind of Gnostic and neo-Platonist spirituality with Christianity. This text is no longer used by any of the Syriac churches for their liturgy or theology, but it's

very helpful to read in order to understand the diversity of early Christianity and also to gain a broader understanding of Greek and Christian philosophy in this early period.

In insert 10 you find a series of texts that have remained part of the Syriac

#### Early Syriac Texts/authors

- Ephrem (Nisibis/Edessa, d 373): commentary, hymns, homilies
- Aphrahat (d. 345, Adiabene): "Demonstrations"
- Peshitta: Syriac Bible translation (2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Gospel Harmonycentury)
- Early liturgy: "Liturgy of Addai and Mari"
- until today in Church of the East

### Insert 10

tradition until today. The most important author of this early period is St. Ephrem, and we have included some of his work in the readings that you will get. He wrote beautiful poems, and his poems are still read and sung in Syriac churches. The Virgin Mary was a very important theme for these songs. His hymns became very famous and were translated into Greek, Romanian, and Arabic – and possibly Coptic too. Another reason why Ephrem is a favorite among many modern scholars and theologians is that he was very much in favor of having women sing in church. He created separate women's choirs and special songs for these choirs; and right up to the present, women's choirs contribute to worship services in Syriac churches.

Aphrahat is less well known, but he nonetheless wrote very interesting explanations of biblical themes. Better known in the East than the West, his writings are important to read in order to gain an understanding of early Syriac Christianity.

The Peshitta, the Syriac Bible translation, was probably written over a long period of time. No one person translated it; rather, various groups of translators made independent contributions that, when assembled, were eventually received into the Syriac tradition. In some parts of the Old Testament, you can see the influence of Jewish Bible translations. Since this translation predates the schisms in the Syriac church, it is used by all the branches of the Syriac churches today.

Finally this is also when the Syriac liturgy emerged and was put into a written form.

# Byzantine Struggles and the Emergence of the Syriac Churches

Now let's discuss the complicated history of the Christological controversies of the fifth century. At this time the church held ecumenical councils in order to resolve the problem and unify the churches around a single theological solution. The result, however, was greater disunity, for the councils contributed to producing the separate churches of the Middle East that we know today. A good place to start is with Nestorius (386-451), the archbishop of Constantinople from 428 to 431. By his way of thinking, the divine and human natures of Christ should not be seen as merging without any remaining distinctions. Applying this approach to the Virgin Mary, he concluded that it would be inappropriate to refer to her as "Mother of God," since that would imply that the divine would have completely overwhelmed and subsumed Christ's humanity at his birth. He preferred the title "Mother of Christ." The way he put this was for many people too strong. They accused him of separating the human and divine natures of Christ. We don't have much of Nestorius' own writing, so it's difficult to be sure of exactly what Nestorius himself thought.

The Byzantine church decided that the way he framed these things was not acceptable, and so he was condemned by the first Council of Ephesus in 431. The second Council of Ephesus, in 449, went even further in prioritizing what came to be known as the Miaphysite position, which was espoused by the patriarchate of Alexandria. It stressed the complete union of the human and divine natures of Christ into one unique human-divine nature. Without referring specifically to Nestorius, many Christians found that the Miaphysite position did not do justice to the necessary distinction between Christ's human and divine natures. Therefore, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the emperor sought a compromise position to reconcile the Miaphysite position with those of the others. However, the final formulations of the Council of



HagiSophia, founded by Emperor Constantius in 360 A.D.

Insert 11

would develop themselves.

Chalcedon were not accepted by the Miaphysites. In the end, the church of Egypt and part of the church of Syria did not accept the Council of Chalcedon and thus the beginning of separate churches can be traced to the mid-fifth century.

The imposing structure of the former Greek Orthodox patriarchal cathedral Hagia Sophia in Istanbul (see insert 11) suggests that the conflict was not only about theology but also about political and ecclesial power. The struggle of the churches of Egypt and Syria with the emperor and church leaders in Constantinople was, at least in part, also about who would make decisions for the imperial church and how the churches all over the Byzantine Empire

On a final note, we should realize that the Church of the East, which was accused of being "Nestorian," was not really involved in these discussions because of the ongoing struggles

between the Persian and Byzantine Empires. This is one of the reasons they did not manage to send representatives to the Council of Chalcedon. Though in hindsight one may conclude that the final formulations of Chalcedon were not so different from those that developed in the Church of the East that followed Nestorius' position, the so-called Nestorians were never rehabilitated by the churches of Rome and Byzantium, let alone by those from the Miaphysite traditions.

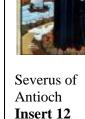
#### **The Syriac Churches**

Let us talk a bit more about the early Syriac tradition. One of the most famous patriarchs in the Christological discussions was Severus of Antioch (465-538, patriarch 512-518) (see insert 12). He opposed the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, which made him a controversial



Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora Insert 13

figure at the time. He was popular in those parts of Syria that were non-Chalcedonian and unpopular in those



favorable to Chalcedon. Today, he is venerated as a saint in the Oriental Orthodox Church and seen as an early patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church.

The Byzantine emperor Justinian (r. 527-565) supported the pro-Chalcedonian imperial church, but his wife, Empress Theodora (r. 527-548), supported the non-Chalcedonian Egyptian and Syrian Orthodox churches (see insert 13). The emperor, who was obviously aware of the Egyptian and Syrian churches,

tried to keep both at peace as best he could.

Jacob Bard'ono (or Baradeus) was the bishop of Edessa (r. 543/-578) (insert 14). When the church of Syria started to split from the imperial church, he traveled around the region to consecrate monks, priests, and bishops in order to build up what is now the Syriac Orthodox Church. Jacob of Sarugh (451-521) was an early poet-theologian of the church. He wrote hymns in the tradition of Ephrem, which became very popular and are sung today even more often than Ehprem's hymns. I included him in your reading list.

Not all Syriac-speaking Christians of the time were part of either the Syriac Orthodox Church or the Church of the East. For a long time the patriarchate of Antioch, though part of the Byzantine ("Greek") Orthodox Church, included many people who spoke Syriac and, during their worship services, sang and prayed in this language. In fact, even in the present the liturgy of the Church of Antioch (with its see in Damascus) includes a few Syriac songs, though most of the hymns are in Arabic.

Another important group to consider is the Maronite Church. This church probably emerged from a group of Christians in the region around present-day Homs in western Syria. The Maronites wanted to find a compromise between the pro-Chalcedonians and the Miaphysites of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Consequently, they



Jacob Bard 'ono (Baradeus) (r. 543-578) Insert 14

supported Monotheletism, one of the compromises that was promulgated by Emperor Heraclius (610-641). According to this position, Christ had one perfectly united will in which his human and divine natures were completely merged, transcending the differentiation between the human and divine natures as accepted at Chalcedon. This position, however, was not accepted by either side of the divide, and the Maronites themselves later came to accept Chalcedonian theology.

There are quite a few uncertainties about the early history of the Maronites. As far as is known, in the fourth century the Maronites were not yet a separate ethnic group; rather, they were lay and monastic people living in and around a monastery. Their region had one large monastery and many smaller ones nearby. According to tradition, the founder of the Maronite Church is St. Maron (d. 410) – or Mar Maron – who lived in the Taurus Mountains as a hermit monk. It was only after his death that his followers established the SyriacMaronite Church. His followers soon developed into a Christian community of not only monks but also families living in parishes. At some point when the conflict between the pro-Chalcedonians and the Syrian Orthodox grew heated, the nascent Maronites gradually moved into the mountains of Lebanon to be safe from persecution. Then they slowly formed their own church. The first patriarch of what was to become the Maronite Church was John Maron (628-707).

#### Monasticism

Monasticism has long been an important and distinctive feature of Syriac Christianity. One of the most famous of the Eastern Orthodox monks was Simeon the Stylite (390-459), who lived for thirty-seven years atop a stylite (pillar) in the ruins of Telanissa, present-day Taladah near Aleppo. Simeon, himself Syriac-speaking, became an important figure in Syriac asceticism. His

form of asceticism was not simply a withdrawal from the world; rather, it was one that was very interested in people. According to Theodore of Cyrrhus (c. 393-460), who was one of the first to write about him, people from all over the area came to his pillar to hear him preach and in hopes that he would heal them. The picture (see insert 15) shows him receiving a leather pouch with food in it. In its embrace of monasticism, the Eastern Orthodox Church of Byzantium, also called the Melkite Church (from Syriac *16 alka*" of the King/Emperor"), included most of the churches of the East.



Left, the first three images are traditional icons of Simeon the Sytlite. Far right, ruins of the Church of Saint Simeon, near Allepo.

Insert 15

#### Sassanian Empire

While the church was growing and developing in Syria, the Church of the East was also expanding in the Sassanian Empire – the last Persian empire before the rise of Islam. Already in the year 410, the church had convened its own synod. This was before Chalcedon, so it should be observed that this church emerged as an independent body on its own initiative, not as a breakaway church. From 410 they also started to call their bishop *Catholicos*, seeing him as equal in rank to the five patriarchs in the West. Later they added the term *patriarch* to *catholicos*: hence we have the Catholicos Patriarch of Seleucia Ctesiphon. Under the Sassanid Persians, Christians generally did quite well; however, there were also periods of persecution. The most important ones were those that occurred around the time of the Council of Chalcedon under Shah Yazdegard II (438-457). Because the Persian rulers wanted to make sure that their Christians would not side with the Byzantine Roman Empire, they did what they could to keep them separate from Rome and away from its influence. Nevertheless, Christians were often accused of treason. When things between the Byzantine Roman Empire and the Sassanian Empire were peaceful, life was generally easier for Christians.

In the end, the theology of the Christians in the Sassanian Empire was not far from Chalcedon. They both had a Dyophysite theology, one affirming the two natures of Christ. The Church of the East did not base its theology on Nestorius but on Theodore of Mopsuestia, who was made an official teacher in the Church of the East by patriarch Bawai (497-502). Though Bawai also made Nestorius an official teacher of the church and he was honored as a saint by the church, the common theological formulations of the church came mostly from Theodore and Bawai. Until today, the Church of the East refrains from calling Mary "Mother of God,"

preferring the title "Mother of Christ." Despite the church's emphasis on the two natures of Christ, a distinction it shares with the Byzantine and Western churches, the Church of the East saw the human nature of Christ as being closely connected to the divine nature, not as something separate from it.

One of the Church of the East's most beautiful poems that expresses this idea is also one of its most popular hymns. In describing the life of Jesus, it ends with alternating refrains: "He is truly a human being" and "He is truly God." The use of one or the other depends on what event is being described. When the hymns refer to Jesus Christ's raising Lazarus from the dead, it says, "He is truly God." But when it tells how Jesus Christ was crying, "He is truly a human being" is used. The hymn alternates between these refrains as it relates Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This poem emphasizes that though Christ is human and divine all the time, it depends on a person's perspective if one is seeing God or a human being. It is the same person, but with two aspects. This exemplifies not only how the Church of the East talks about the two natures of Christ but also they, like all Syriac Christians, prefer to talk theologically through their hymns.

The Church's theological centers were the schools of Nisibis, Syria, founded in 489; Gondeshapur, Persia, founded in the sixth century; and a center in Seleucia Ctesiphon, near Babylon, founded in 640-652. During the patriarchate of Bawai (497-502), the Church of the East made the Dyophysite theology, mostly via the teaching of Theodore of Mopsuesia, its official teaching. In addition to developing schools, the church also saw a monastic tradition develop, which was similar to how it developed elsewhere in the Middle East – in Sinai, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria.

### **Concluding Points on the Church of the East**

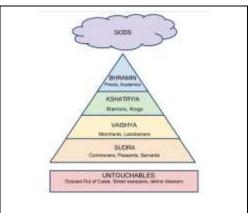
In conclusion it should be noted that the Church of the East, together with the Syriac Orthodox Church, was particularly important on the Arabian Peninsula. When we think about the type of Christianity that existed in the place where Islam started, we should think foremost about Syriac Christianity. It is difficult, though, to say whether the Church of the East or the Syrian Orthodox Church was more important.

It is also important to remember the Persian military campaign in Palestine in 614. It was a devastating attack that filled the Palestinian monasteries with the corpuses of the monks. It was on this occasion that the Persians obtained what was generally believed to be a piece of the holy cross, previously held and venerated by the Christians of Jerusalem. When the dust of the battle of 614 had settled, a long series of peace negotiations followed. These were concluded by a peace treaty between the Romans and the Persians that stipulated the return of the Holy Cross relic, whose recovery was marked by a procession led by patriarch Ishoyahb of the Church of the East. While peace was restored, the power of the Romans and Persians declined, and the last Persian King, Yazdegard III, is said to have found refuge in a monastery in his last days, though it is not certain that he converted. In the meantime the geopolitical balance of the region changed as it was conquered by Islamic armies, bring to an end he rule of Romans and Persians.

#### Syriac Church in India

I have already mentioned India, which was important for the Church of the East but today also

for the other Syriac churches. We don't have any firm evidence of the earliest arrival of Christianity in India. The Acts of Thomas, which was written sometime in the third or fourth century, tells the story of the Apostle Thomas traveling to India, though it seems to refer more to the North than the South of India. The Syriac story suggests that there is a connection between the Syriac Church and India, but it should not be treated as a historical record of conversion. A more historically reliable text is that of the travels of Cosmas in the sixth century, who in the Syriac records is referred to as *Indicopleustes*, which means the person who traveled to India. He traveled through eastern Asia, including India, and made a record of the Christians belonging to the Church of the East. Consequently, scholars are certain that there was a church there at the



The hierarchy of India's cast system Insert 16

time. From Roman times through the sixth century and later, there was much contact between the Western world and India. Hence, it is consistent with what we know of the times to imagine Westerns traveling there. There were two ways to travel to India, either overland by way of what was later called the Silk Roads in the north or by the sea route via the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea to the south. Later on, in the eighth and ninth centuries, there is more evidence – such as the famous Copper Plates in India – giving evidence for the existence of Christianity at the time.

Another indication that Christianity in India is rather old is that it is completely incorporated into the caste system. This complex system ranks the people of India in a social hierarchy (see insert 16). In this

system, the Syrian Christians are ranked quite high, close to the Brahmins. This is not the case for modern converts to Christianity because the recent conversions of people to Christianity in India have generally been from among those in the lower caste – that is, the untouchables – and conversion did not change that. Indian Christians in ancient times were often traders who lived along both the eastern and western sides of the subcontinent.

While the descendants of the early Syriac Christians from the Middle East are found mostly on the West Coast, in Kerala, on the East coast there are also traces of the old Christianity. The church in insert 17, though keeping an old Pahlavi stone (with a dove now

painted in white) from the pre-Portuguese times, was rebuilt in Portuguese style after they took over in the sixteenth century. All ancient Christians in the area have become Catholics.

It is on the east coast that the grave of St. Thomas can be found (see insert 18 and 19). I'm not convinced of its authenticity, but it is an interesting holy shrine to visit. Among Syriac Christians in India – and also among many non-Syriac Christians – Thomas is still highly regarded. These Indian Syriac Christians in ancient times and even in more recent times, as we will see when we discuss the Ottoman period, played an



Indian Catholic church with Syriac/Aramaic Pahlavi inscription Insert 17

important role in the Middle East – and vice versa.



Modern day image of St. Thomas **Insert 18** 



Shrine of St. Thomas, India **Insert 19** 

# Appendix to lecture 1

## The Syriac Hymns

"The Odes of Solomon," which I mentioned the other day, are among the oldest texts in Syriac literature and may not have been written as Christian texts. We will see, however, that this type of poetry is often used in the subsequent Syriac tradition and that this particular text added to the Syriac hymnal tradition. Let's look at a portion of the text:

#### Odes of Solomon<sup>1</sup>

- 11. And the Lord renewed me with his garment, and possessed me by His light.
- 12. And from above He gave me immortal rest, and I Became like the land that blossoms and rejoices in its fruits.
- 13. And the Lord is like the sun upon the face of the land.
- 14. My eyes were enlightened, and my face received the dew;
- 15. And my breath was refreshed by the pleasant fragrance of the Lord...
- 16. And he took me to His Paradise, wherein the wealth of the Lord's pleasure.

I beheld blooming and fruit-bearing trees,

And self-grown was their crown.

Their branches were sprouting and their fruits were shining.

From an immortal land were their roots.

And a river of gladness was irrigating them,

And round about them in the land of eternal life.

17. Then I worshipped the Lord because of his magnificence.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Ode 11; for an English translation, see James H. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*( Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), also available online: http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/odes.html.

There are a couple of things here that we will see appear – and appear in many different ways – in the later Syriac tradition. In the first sentence (verse 11), the way God comes to people is compared to a garment and light. If you read Syriac texts, you will see that these same motifs are applied to Jesus, who is depicted as putting on humanity like a garment and as having the light of God shinning in him. But that is not the most important thing about this poem. The reason I selected this one is that in it one can see how Syriac writers used nature to explain the nature of God and goodness and related matters. They did this through nature metaphors: blossoms, the sun upon the land, the dew. In Paradise one sees trees bearing much fruit – a theme often repeated. This paradisiacal imagery is often found in Syriac writers such as Ephrem, and it is found not only among Aramaic writers but also among the writers of the entire region of the Middle East. It is the distinct way that this culture expresses religious ideas.

Now let's look at a hymn by Ephrem the Syrian:

The shepherd, under him who has become head of the flock; who was disciple of the Three, and has become our fourth master A[braham]., Blessed He Who has made him our comfort!

In one love will I cause them to *shire*, and as a *crown* will I Weave them, the splendid *blossoms*, and the fragrant *Flowers* of the teacher and of his disciples, who remained After him as Elisha; for the horn of his election and he was Consecrated and became head, and he was exalted and Became master A[braham]., Blessed be He Who made him chief. [Italics mine].

He is speaking here about a very important teacher, Abraham of Nisibis. In Ephrem's writing, one finds the same types of nature metaphors that we have seen before: lights, shining, blossoms, a crown, and flowers. This is a small sample, but it is representative of his writing. If you read Ephrem, you will much more of this; and you will also find it in the Syriac liturgy.