

THE  
NESTORIAN  
FATHERS

MAR APREM

ܘܚܝܝܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܘܫܘܪܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܪܝܢ

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THE  
NESTORIAN FATHERS

MAR APREM

TRICHUR  
KERALA, INDIA.

1976

THE NESTORIAN FATHERS

By Most Rev. Mar Aprem, B.D., M.Th., S.T.M.

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# FOREWORD

It was in 1926 that the Mar Narsai Press was established in Trichur by Mar Abimalek Timotheus (d. 1945) Metropolitan of Malabar and India. Since then it has made a worthy progress. It has a good reputation now among the printing presses in Trichur for professional acumen in the art of printing.

As a publisher of Syriac books Mar Narsai Press made a significant contribution not only in India but also abroad. The Assyrians in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Australia, England and America regularly write to Mar Narsai Press for their annual calendars in Syriac language. The three volumes of Khudra, one of its prized publications, undertaken by Mar Thoma Darmo (d. 1969) as well as other liturgical books are in great demand.

As we celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Mar Narsai Press, the managing committee felt that it should bring out some publications in Syriac, English and Malayalam. The first of these golden Jubilee publications is *The Nestorian Fathers*. It includes the biography of Mar Narsai in whose name this Press was founded.

We are grateful to Mar Aprem Metropolitan who undertook the task of writing this book while he is carrying out his varied responsibilities. We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the Rev. P. L. Francis, B. A., L. T., who read the proof sheets of this book while the author was outside Kerala during the printing its latter part.

Trichur, }  
31-3-1976. }

Managing Committee,  
Mar Narsai Press.

## P R E F A C E

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The ancient Church of the East was nicknamed Nestorian just because the members of that church in the Persian empire refused to anathematize John Nestorius Patriarch of Constantinople. The history of the controversy is long and complicated and needs a separate treatment by itself. However this book is meant to give brief biographies of the fathers of the Church including Nestorius venerated by the Church of the East.

This book is entitled "The Nestorian Fathers" because, whether we like it or not, we have been described as the Nestorians. Without making any reference to the theological implications and insinuations of the term Nestorian, here it is used only for the sake of easy identification by readers of various Christian backgrounds.

The present generation knows very little about the fathers of this ancient Christian Church. Almost all the fathers treated in this book are East Syrian or Assyrian fathers except the Greek trio i.e. Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius of Antioch. They wrote and taught in Greek. The Eastern Syriac language was unknown to them. Since they are recognized as the fathers of the church of the East, they are included in this book.

When Mar Kardakh Church was constructed in Madras — in the city where St. Thomas is believed to have been martyred — many of the parishioners asked me who Mar Kardakh was. I had known that he was an Assyrian general who became a martyr. I did not know much more than that. I met several scholars who knew something about the East Syrian or Assyrian Church. But nobody knew about Mar Kardakh. As I continued my search to dig up details about the man in whose name this Church was dedicated, I was delighted to discover his biography in the Syriac book of *Sharba d' Sahde vad Kadhishe* (history of the martyrs and saints). The Reverend P. D. Francis was kind enough to translate it from Syriac to Malayalam. The English translation was made by myself and published in the Voice of the East.

More than a decade ago I wrote a series of articles entitled "History of our Fathers" and published in the Voice of the East. Since those articles were published I had the good fortune of studying in New York and Princeton during the years 1966 to 1968. I occasionally came across a book or two throwing some light on these fathers. But hardly one single book helps an ordinary reader to know about the prominent fathers of this church. I was convinced that a book on the history of the fathers of the Church of the East will be warmly welcomed by students of church history.

Several responsibilities and programmes during the last seven years did not leave me much spare time to undertake this work. Nevertheless, fresh requests came from the Sunday School of our church in India to include the history of our fathers in their syllabus. My articles published in the Voice of the East a decade ago were selected to be included in their text book. Although I could not find time to revise them, these articles were translated into Malayalam and printed in the Sunday School text book.

My irresistible urge to write and propagate the history and faith of our fathers persuaded me to revise these articles and bring out this book. The encouragement and welcome given to the two biographies of my predecessors made me to undergo the ordeal of writing and proof reading.

The choice of the fathers is mine based on my assessment of the significance and relevance of each one for an adequate understanding of the history of the Church of the East. Variety is visible in the selection. Theologians, poets, monks, patriarchs, canonists etc. are represented in this small list of fathers.

The readers will realise as they go through these pages that most of these prominent men were not familiar to them. The reason was that most of these East Syrian fathers belonged to a period after the unfortunate Nestorian controversy of the

fifth century. Theologians, and martyrs who belonged to the Persian Church were not recognized by the universal Church. The church in the West practically knew nothing about that church. Nevertheless, as far as the Nestorian Church was concerned, they were well known and prominent leaders of that Church.

Some of the writings of these famous men were never translated into English. This was another reason for the lack of knowledge in the Western world regarding the fathers discussed in this book.

This book is meant to fill that vacuum. Although very brief biographical sketches they are, the writer has attempted to mention some of the writings of these famous men. The bibliography mentions some books which readers can use for further study and research.

Although most of these sketches are written in a very abridged form, "Mar Kardakh" is given in its original style as it is found in Syriac. That too is considerably condensed. Still it gives a clue to the modern readers how the ancient Syriac style was. The biography of Mar Yakob is also found in the same style and size in Syriac. But I have edited it drastically. The purpose of this book is to throw light on the fathers in the easiest readable form.

As far as I know, some of these studies are entirely new in English. Those who do not know Syriac have no access at all to these books. Even those who know Syriac language, hardly digest the old language, as the Assyrians usually speak modern Syriac which they call *Swadaya*. The old language (*lishana athika*) is known only to a privileged few.

That makes this book more invaluable and inevitable. I do not claim this to be a very erudite treatise. The readership in my mind is both scholars and the ordinary lay people. For the sake of the ordinary readers I have deliberately discarded some technical and scholarly notations that ornament (does it?) the bottom margin of some books.

This book is completed on September 21, 1975, the seventh anniversary of my episcopal consecration.

Metropolitan's Palace. }  
TRICHUR, Kerala. }

MAR APREM.

# I

## MAR SHIMUN BAR SABHAI (d.339)

Among the names of the Patriarchs of the Church of the East, the name of Mar Shimun Bar Sabhai is very important. Due to his martyrdom his name obtained an important place in the history of our church. Moreover we have to remember his patriarchate as the Council of Nicea was held during that period. Though the Patriarch was not present in person, it is believed that some representatives of our church including the famous Mar Aprem was present in the Council.

It was in 320 A. D. that Mar Shimun Bar Sabhai became the Head of the Church of the East. When Sapor II (339-379 A. D.) was the king of Persia, Constantine was the Roman Emperor. Claiming a sort of protectorate over all Christians, Constantine wrote to Sapor II asking for protection and favour for the Christians residing in Persia. Unfortunately both the empires were in war with each other and the Persians were suspicious of the activities of the Christians.

As a result of the heavy expenses caused by the war between the two countries, Sapor II ordered Mar Shimun Bar Sabhai to collect the double tax from the Christians. The Patriarch refused it on the ground that his people were too poor to pay that. He did not wish to be a tax collector. Though Sapor II was a personal friend of the Patriarch, due to the influence of the Mazdean hierarchy with which the King was surrounded, the King ordered the arrest of the Patriarch and the immediate destruction of all Christian Churches.

The headquarters of the Church of the East in those early days was Seleucia. The Patriarch was arrested and removed to Karka d'Ledan. The Patriarch gave his farewell blessing to his flock, "May the cross of our Lord be the protection of the people of Jesus. May the peace of God be with the servants of God and stabilise your hearts in the faith of Christ, in tribulation and in ease, in life and in death, now and for evermore."

The greatness of this brave father of our church is reflected clearly in his most daring statement he made when he was asked to worship the sun only once for the sake of the freedom of his and his people. Mar Shimun said "The sun went into mourning when its creator died." In spite of the repeated requests of his personal friend Sapor II the noble Patriarch remained firm and received the crown of martyrdom on the first day of the feast of unleavened bread in 339 A. D. A terrible persecution followed.

Mar Shimun died for two of the noblest causes for which it was possible for man to suffer. His faith in God and his sense of duty to his people are examples for all the generations to follow. His life teaches us many good lessons. If he had not strong faith in God he would have yielded to the request to worship the sun once. If he had not his sense of duty to his people he would have attempted to collect double tax to escape persecution. But Mar Shimun was not a coward of that sort. Let us thank God for such Patriarchs. Let us follow the footsteps of this noble and worthy Patriarch who was blessed with the crown of martyrdom.

While remembering the hallowed memory of this martyr Patriarch, we cannot but mention Tarbo, a sister of this Patriarch. She served the church as a deaconness. She too was arrested in Seleucia because the Jews reported that the illness of the queen was due to the sorceries of Tarbo who was avenging the death of her martyred Patriarch, Mar Shimun Bar Sabhai.

After Tarbo had been arrested along with her sister and their servant, they were brought to the capital. The chief Mobed conducted a trial and condemned these brave ladies to death. They were cut in pieces. Then the queen was carried in a litter in the midst of the dead bodies of these holy women.

## II

# LADY MARTYRS

In the "International year for women" it is appropriate that a chapter in this book is devoted to the women martyrs of our church. It is difficult to decide who among them should be given the privilege of finding a place among the Nestorian Fathers. So this chapter is devoted to several women, whose many names have never been mentioned before. Let us have a look at some of the women martyrs of the fourth century.

Although women played a significant role in the ministry of Jesus Christ by accompanying him as well as being close to him at the time of his crucifixion and Resurrection, women did not find any place in the ordained ministry of the Church. Nevertheless, women suffered persecution as much as men. Therefore let us look at some of those women who smilingly faced the horrible persecution of the fourth century. They received the crown of martyrdom with great joy without any fear or regret.

In the notorious persecution of Sapor II a consecrated virgin named Warda (which means Rose) was arrested along with a priest named Daniel. They had to suffer torments for a period of three months. Their feet were bored with sharp irons, then they were placed in freezing water for five days. Later they were beheaded.

In the same province, nine consecrated virgins and more than a hundred clergy were imprisoned in a filthy dungeon at Seleucia. During their persecution a noble Christian lady named Jardundoeta, a native of Arbel, took care of these fellow Christians. On the morning of their martyrdom she commended herself to their prayers and arranged for their honourable burial.

In 346 A. D. a new edict against the Christians was promulgated. A fierce persecution followed. Narses Tamaspur, a violent persecutor, arrested one Mary and her brother James. The persecutor forced them to feed on some preparation of blood. Mary and James refused to do it and craned their necks to be beheaded. It is a pity that they were beheaded by the hands of a noble apostate named Mahdades.

In the little town of Casciaz there was a priest named Paul. He was a rich man with some property. The persecutor Tamaspur wanted to take the money of this priest by killing him. When

planning to arrest the priest, the police took into custody five holy virgins of a convent. They were Thecla, Mary, Martha, second Mary, and Anna. The virgins did not deny their faith; but the priest denied his faith and thus saved his property. Tamaspur thought that the priest would not persist in his apostasy if he was appointed the persecutor of these five consecrated virgins. But the priest preferred his property to his conscience.

The priest did not mind the awful disgrace of killing the consecrated virgins who practiced the faith which this priest preached. This Judas Iscariot wanted to keep his thirty pieces of silver. So, he became the executioner of these dedicated Christian virgins in order to preserve his perishable property. When the virgins were handed over to him to be slain after having received 100 stripes each, they asked "Are we to be made a sacrifice by those very hands from which so recently we received that holy thing, the sacrifice and propitiation of the whole world?"<sup>1</sup> Still the priest beheaded these virgins to save his property. But the same night the guards of Tamaspur entered the prison and killed the greedy and miserable priest.

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1 John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, Reprint by Mar Narsai Press, Trichur, 1961, pp. 25, 26.

Most of the information in this chapter is taken from the above mentioned book.

Not only in the persecution of Sapor II in the 4th century but also in the subsequent persecutions of Bahram V (420 A. D.) and Yezdgerd II (438 A. D.) women paid a heavy price for their faith. The well known incident of a Christian mother Shirin who witnessed the martyrdom of her two sons and later submitted herself for the glorious crown took place during the persecution of Yezdgerd II.

In conclusion it must be stated that women suffered martyrdom just like men. In Christian faith women played their part with courage and determination.

The women who witnessed the crucifixion of our Lord at the foot of the Cross of Calvary showed an example for Christian women to follow for the subsequent generations. And many women showed great courage in witnessing to the faith. The names of many are not known. This chapter is dedicated to the imperishable memory of the innumerable women martyrs of our church.

### III

## MAR KARDAKH (d-358)

Mar Kardakh was born in the noble family of the Assyrian Kings. His father was of the family of Nimrod and mother of Sennacherib. His parents were fire worshippers. His father Gushnavi was well known throughout the Kingdom. The youth Kardakh was beautiful and strong. He was a good warrior. At the age of 25, King Sapor of Persia heard about his exceptional qualities and appointed him as a commander of his soldiers. When he went for hunting Kardakh killed a deer and its baby with one arrow. The King praised Kardakh for his ability and appointed him as the governor of Assyria, from the river Thurmara to the city of Nisibis and gave several costly presents to him and to his father.

When Kardakh reached his realm of administration, the Christians were very much scared

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This is a summary of the history written in the *Sharba D' Sahde O' Kaddishe*. Volume II. Page 442—506. Translated from Syriac into Malayalam by the Rev. P. D. Francis. This is the first historical account of this famous martyr in English.

because they were well aware of his zeal for the pagan religion of fire-worship. They had been persecuted by King Sapor II. Therefore they prayed ardently. When Kardakh went to his house in Arbil, the fire worshippers had a big festival. He gave presents to the house of fire worship. After a few days he built a huge palace and fortress on a hill called Malki. There he built a temple for fire worship and appointed priests. It took two years for the construction of this mighty fortress. While the construction was going on, a soldier on a horse appeared to Kardakh in his dream and announced "You know it for certain that you will die in front of this fortress as a martyr for Christ". Kardakh questioned, "Who are you to give a bad omen like this to me?". The blessed soldier replied "I am Sargis, the servant of Jesus. I am not telling you a bad news as you think. I am informing you what is going to happen as Jesus Christ has revealed". When Kardakh woke up from his sleep, he was scared. He told about this dream secretly to his mother. She told, "My son, don't labour against Christians. Because I know very well that they worship the only true God. It may be their God who showed this vision to you". But Kardakh did not mind this very much.

The Blessed Abdisho was living in a cave in Beth Bghash in Arbil. Christ appeared to him and commanded. "Go to governor Kardakh. Through

you I will capture him to my bond. He is going to suffer much for my sake." Abdisho took a stick and a gospel and went to meet Kardakh. He crossed the road where Kardakh was going with his soldiers. Kardakh was angry and ordered two soldiers to beat him. Then Kardakh tried to ride on the horse and throw the cannon balls for target practice. But Abdisho raised his hand and made the sign of the cross and prayed. As a result the cannon balls just fell down without going forward. The soldiers could not remove them. Then the soldiers guessed that this man must be a magician. One of them testified that he saw Addisho making the sign of the cross of the Christians.

Kardakh returned to the Palace and called Abdisho. He shouted with anger "Hey man, tell me where you are from. What is your profession?" Abdisho replied that he was an Assyrian Christian and made a testimony of Christ. Kardakh was angry and ordered to hit Abdisho on his face. But Abdisho prayed God to fulfil the vision; Kardakh stated that the prisoner might be a man of God. He returned to his palace worried. He decided in his heart to release the prisoner next morning itself. During the night the angels appeared to Abdisho and sang with him in the prison.

His chains fell from him. The angels took him out of the prison and told "follow us" and led him to his cave.

The next morning Kardakh ordered to bring the prisoner. The soldiers were terrified when they saw the prison empty. The place was filled with good aroma. When the soldiers reported this to Kardakh he was sorry and testified "Truly the God of Christians is great. He created heaven and earth and all that are therein. There is no God except him."

At once he entered his inner chamber and drew a cross on the eastern wall and prayed to Jesus Christ. At the end of his prayer, he heard the sweet soft voice "To anyone who asks it will be given, search it will be found, knock it will be opened." He came out and ate food with his household and the priest who used to offer sacrifice before eating. They were surprised when they saw Kardakh eating without the usual sacrifice.

After three days Abdisho appeared in a vision to Kardakh and asked him to go to the Panyath cave if he wished to meet Abdisho. The next morning, with two of his faithful soldiers, Kardakh went to Mount Bghash. On the way Satan, appearing as an old man, cursed Kardakh. When the soldiers wanted to kill this old man Kardakh stopped him and cursed the Satan in the human form and made the sign of the cross. Suddenly it turned into a snake and left.

Holy Kardakh continued his journey. During the night Mar Sargis the martyr, appeared to him

and told: "Brother Kardakh, your start is good. You fought well in order to be my brother. For ever until you receive the crown of martyrdom, I will be with you and help you to reach into perfection." The next evening an angel appeared to Abdisho when Kardakh was nearing his cave. As per the angel's command Abdisho went out to receive Kardakh who came down from the horse and apologized to Abdisho. Both the holy men entered the cave. During the evening prayer a group of angry devils insulted Kardakh. But Kardakh rebuked the demons. So they departed crying and shaking the mountains.

After the service they made bread. When they began to eat the angel of the Lord appeared and said "Peace be with you." The angel gave a piece of bread which both the holy men ate after prayer. They spent the night also in prayer.

About nine miles far from them, there was a cave in which an old man named Beri was living in seclusion for 68 years. The Lord appeared to Beri in a vision and asked him to go and strengthen Kardakh. Abdisho was surprised to see Beri because he never went out of his cave for 68 years. Beri asked Abdisho "An honourable guest has come to you. Why did not you invite me to share in that joy?" Abdisho replied "Forgive me father, I did not want trouble your old age. Anyhow it should not have been that way." The old

man said "Even if you did not invite me, the Lord sent me here." They prayed and exchanged peace. Then the old man embraced Kardakh and strengthened him in faith and returned to his own cave.

Five days Kardakh spent with Abdisho requesting him to baptise him. On the sixth morning Mar Sargis martyr appeared in vision to Abdisho and asked him to baptise Kardakh. Abdisho woke Kardakh up and went to the nearby monastery and Kardakh and his two soldiers were baptised. After baptism Kardakh stayed with Abdisho for seven days. Satan again appeared to Kardakh. But Kardakh rebuked him again.

Kardakh returned to his house and sent for a monk named Isaac who taught the Psalms of David and read the gospel. He stopped eating meat and ate only little food, that too once in the night. He gave from his treasury wealth to the churches and monasteries as well as to the poor. His relatives were sorry to see the wealth being given away. But Kardakh advised them regarding the foolishness of hoarding worldly wealth. He was at peace in his family. He stopped hunting etc. He spent time in fasting and prayer.

His parents were living in a place called Bar Hivthon. They had a lot of properties and a temple for the fire worship. He converted that temple into big monastery. It remains there to this day.

When the parents came to know that Kardakh became a Christian and began to distribute his wealth to the Churches, monasteries, poor etc; his father wrote a letter of protest to Kardakh, although his mother did not want to disturb her son. Kardakh's wife also wrote a letter to her father regarding this. But following a vision she decided not to send this letter. She reconciled with the deeds of Kardakh.

After six months when Kardakh had gone to stay in the cave of Holy man Beri, the Romans and the Thai tribes (Arabs) attacked Assyria and looted his palace and captured his parents, wife, brother, sister *et al.* 235 soldiers who escaped went to the cave of Beri and reported the matter to Kardakh. With the blessings of Beri and Abdisho. Kardakh returned to his fortress at Mount Malki. Kardakh sent a letter to the invaders to return the people and to keep only the wealth. They replied with rebuke and insults. When they received the second warning they cut and send to Kardakh the head of his brother. Finally after prayer Kardakh destroyed the enemy and brought back the captives.

Entering his place he destroyed the idols of worship, and established altar for Jesus. The priests of idols secretly wrote to King Sapor and told about this. The angry king asked him "How did you come to know about all this? But did

you not hear that Kardakh, with only 234 soldiers, conquered thousands of Romans and ten thousands of Thai (Arabs) tribes?" Although the priest left disappointed, he stirred up the noble men against Kardakh. Under the pressure of dukes, King Sapor sent an invitation to Kardakh to go there to be congratulated personally by the king in his great victory. Since the king loved Kardakh personally he requested Kardakh to keep secretly his conversion in the presence of the dukes. But Kardakh made an open testimony. So with deep sorrow king gave Kardakh up to be killed. The King commanded him to be given to one hundred horsemen, fifty soldiers, twenty noblemen. He wrote a letter to Gushnadad and Din Gushnaip, the leaders of the Magi. In that letter king asked him to give seven months time for Kardakh to repent and to renounce the Christian faith. If he did not repent he should be stoned to death in front of his own house. His blood will be on his own head. We will be free from his blood.

When Gushnadad and Din Gushnaip read the Royal command regarding Kardakh they at once took Kardakh to Bursmair who was ruling the west of the city of Nisibis. Bursmair who was the commander of the region and the pagan priests received Kardakh and requested him to return to the pagan faith and continue in power as commanded by the king. Kardakh replied: "I am a Christian, I will

not worship sun and moon like you." Then they took him to a judge named Shahar Vasth. It was evening when they reached the monastery of Mar Yahov. Shahar Vasth was living there. He was a bad man. He used to persecute Christians in order to return to their pagan faith. He went and received Kardakh telling that he would not touch Kardakh, as he had deserted the faith of the Magi and become a Christian. "You obey me and worship sun and moon, and liberate yourself by the Magi priests. Otherwise, you will have to suffer much from me." The blessed man replied: "You shameful dog! may the Messiah whom I have confessed, scold you." When he said like this, the judge became much angry. He ordered to put additional chains on his body. He also ordered to bring the scissors and other tools of persecution and place before him. They put one iron chain on his neck. They persecuted him with iron combs etc.

That night Mar Abdisho, Monk Beri and the blessed Mar Sargis the Martyr appeared to him. "Be strong, don't be afraid Mar Kardakh." Afterwards they released him from bonds. He prayed together with them. They strengthened him. They left him after signing the cross. He did not cease from praying to God until the morning. He was ready to receive the beautiful crown of martyrdom. He prayed to God as follows: "Lord, Almighty

God, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, make me worthy to be counted among thy worshippers. If anybody take shelter in this place and supplicates here remembering my name, may his requests, be fulfilled from treasury of grace, may he obtain comfort and health from sickness either from men or beasts, out of the overflow of thy grace."

In the morning all bad people gathered and threatened him saying: "If you do not worship sun, you will be subjected to bitter death." He replied: "Children of hell, leave me, I am worshipping the King Messiah. Because he is the King of Kings, Lord of Lords." When the judge heard this, he wanted to kill him then and there. But since the King's command was to wait for seven months and then stone him if he did not repent etc., they could not do anything at that time. The leaders of the Magi also were not willing. But like King's command they took Kardakh to his house to be killed immediately.

When they reached near his fortress on the Malki Mount, the holy man raised up his eyes and saw his fortress and Palace. He looked up to heaven and in his heart prayed to God saying: "Messiah, my hope: thou gave up thine body on the cross to redeem our mankind, as thy hands and feet were pierced by nails, released Adam and his children from the bonds of death. Release me too from these bonds and deliver me from these

lost pagans. That my enemies may see and be put to shame and to know that it was thyself who helped and comforted me." At once the chains fell from his feet and hands. He turned to the east and prayed. He spread his hands stretching to heaven praised God. When the noblemen, soldiers, pagans *et al* saw what happened, some ran away, others scattered in different directions. Some others hurried, to hide among the weeds and grass in the centre of the lake near the fortress of the blessed man. He went to his fortress and to Palace rejoicing and praising God. He encouraged his wife, sister and the household. He ordered the watchmen and appointed soldiers on the wall of his fortress.

When King Sapor heard this news, he was scared. He gnashed his teeth with anger. He roared like a lion. King Sapor sent order to the commander of the western region named Bursmeyer to attack the fortress and capture Kardakh. Moreover, he ordered to stone Kardakh to death in front of his own fortress. The soldiers went and watched the fortress for one month. But they could not conquer. So the commander went with his whole army. But no use. Therefore they wrote to the King. "If it is not possible to capture him by praise or cunningness, it is not possible to capture him by strength or fight." As commanded by the King the army began to disperse. Ten

battalions of army encamped at a distance of two or three miles from the fort. Some noblemen related to him came to him by the command of the King and requested him to obey the King to save his parents and brothers from perishing. Kardakh told them "Hey men! why do you take the trouble? Why you too have come?" They cried and begged him to worship sun and moon at least once and save the whole family. Then he could do anything according to his will. Kardakh made a big speech testifying his faith in the King of Kings Messiah and not the cruel and evil King. They ran away when they heard the blasphemy against their King. The holy man smiled and told them they were telling blasphemy against Almighty God.

While they were talking, the leaders of the Magi such as Gushnadad, Din Gusnap *et al* came there with many priests. They shouted from near his fortress saying that if he worshipped the pagan gods as per the command of the King, he would live and stay in power. Otherwise he would die. Kardakh filled with anger told them: "Servants of Satan, shameful people, shut up your mouths. Impossible to worship silent idols leaving the true God who has created heaven and earth. Let this not come to pass. I consider the shameful orders of your pagan King as the blasphemies of the Satan against God." When the priests heard this

reply they turned back and ran as they could not hear such blasphemy. One of them named Saihar Sad took dust from the ground and threw into the mouth of Kardakh. Kardakh secretly sent an arrow which pierced the mouth of that priest, who instantly died. The holy man said with a smile: "Let this be a reward for your love towards your King and gods." Afterwards the priests and noblemen returned with regret.

Kardakh called a wise man named Anosh and asked him "Anosh, do you think that I am staying inside the fort because I am afraid to die for Messiah? No, not so. May not God cause that to happen. It is desirable for me to die for Messiah than this transitory life. But I will not deliver myself to the people of darkness until Messiah commands me in dream or vision that time has come for me to die. I have decided by the strength of Messiah the King that no man can do any harm to my life....."

Finally Nicogen, the father-in-law of Kardakh, came to see him and told him that he would die if Kardakh did not obey the king. Kardakh told Nicogen that he lost his brain. He was lost because he worshipped the idols. Then Nicogen stated that he could insult him and scold him. But just save him from death. Because of Kardakh the King has threatened Nicogen. He told Kardakh to do

one of the two alternatives. Either renounce Christian faith or come out of the fortress and die like the unwise Christians. "Because of you let us not be put to death." Then Kardakh stated that he would not renounce the living God. He would not worship the images. He declared his intention to go out of the fortress and deliver himself up to the killers, if he was convinced that the time had come.

Soon the news spread in all regions under Kardakh's administration that the blessed man was prepared to die for Messiah. Christians, Jews and pagans came to the soldier of justice. His parents and brethren also came. Thousands and tens of thousands of people waited for 21 days. The holy man spent his time in prayer to gain strength to face martyrdom. His father requested permission to enter inside the fortress and talk with him. He refused. But he sent word through one of his servants: "Our Lord Jesus has taught us through His gospel that if any one wants to follow me without giving up his father, mother, brothers, sisters, wife and children, he is unworthy to be my disciple. Therefore I do not want to see your face. Because your thoughts and words are obstacle for my journey. Afterwards Nicogen, being anxious to see his daughter Susan, requested him to send her. The holy man told his wife; "Go to your father and find out why he wants you. But

I know very well that his talk will be destruction for your soul". Her father asked her to persuade her husband to come out of the fort and to save the lives of the relatives. But Kardakh rebuked her.

Afterwards the holy man had a vision. He saw that in one morning he was standing in front of the gate of his fort and crowds of people throwing jewels at his body and blood coming out of his body. He saw a man standing in the air and called "Brother Kardakh, at Jerusalem these jewels were thrown at me by my own people. Now your father will throw you with a jewel. Then soon you will happily come to my place". Kardakh asked: "Master, who are you?" He replied: "I am deacon Stephen who was stoned for the sake of the living gospel." Kardakh told his teacher Isaac about the vision. Isaac read to Kardakh the story of Stephen from the Acts of the Apostles. Kardakh very much desired to die for Messiah.

Suddenly the holy man knelt and prayed. He kissed the gospel and signed the cross. The gate of the fortress was open. Like a bridegroom he went out. Christians, Jews, gentiles and others hurried to witness the martyrdom of the holy man. The King's command was read. The mounted horsemen proceeded forward and commanded each one to throw one stone at the holy man. As the people threw stones the holy man looked up to

heaven and prayed. He announced that until his own father threw a stone he would not die. His father being blind of the fire worship, and by the fear of death, and to please the King and the noble-men, folding his turban around his face, participated in the stoning of his son. Immediately the soul of that soldier of justice departed for eternal life.

At that moment, the place of stoning filled with good smell. A voice was heard soon. "You fought a good fight, famous Kardakh, you have won victory with courage. Come and receive your crown of victory."

The martyrdom took place on a Friday in the 49th year of the reign of Sapor. On Saturday early morning his body was buried by his admirers. Every year his memory is observed there. It became a place of festival yearly three days for memory and nine days for feast. They called the place the "Malki Corner."

Later a beautiful church was built where he was martyred. We may be helped by his prayers. Unto Him, and to His Father and to the Holy Ghost glory, honour and praise for ever. Amen.

## IV

### MAR APREM (d. 373 A. D.)

Mar Aprem (known as "Ephrem the Syrian") flourished in the 4th century of the Christian era, acquired great renown among his contemporaries, and has since been esteemed as one of the most celebrated fathers of the Church. Though he was only a deacon, his name was always used with a prefix "Mar" meaning "my Lord", which is usually used for the members of the hierarchy.

Mar Aprem was born about 306 A. D. at Nisibis, in the eastern-most province of the Roman empire. His father was of Nisibis and mother of the city Amida. Aprem left his parents in childhood and received his early education under an old anchorite and he became a hermit. He was called to the episcopal house at Nisibis where he received further instruction from the holy Mar Yacob, the bishop of Nisibis. In 325 A.D., Aprem accompanied Mar Yacob to Nicea to attend the first Ecumenical Council. Aprem achieved fame as a theologian of great eloquence.

In 363 A. D., Jovian the Roman emperor had to make a disadvantageous treaty with Sapor II, King of Persia. As a result, Nisibis again became a part of the Persian Empire. So the Christian population left Nisibis to Edessa, the capital of the Roman province of Western Mesopotamia. At Edessa Mar Aprem became a famous theologian and one of the greatest biblical exegetes which the world has ever known.

During his ten years of stay at Edessa, he wrote commentaries on the books of the Holy Bible. He preached many sermons against the heretics. His eloquence kept his audience spell-bound and often moved them to tears. As a participant in the Council of Nicea, he defended Nicean Orthodoxy against Arians, Bardaisan, Marcion and Mani. His poems and sermons are great authority for theology of the Church of the East as well as of the Universal Church. His teachings about the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist and Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ were strong barriers against contemporary and later heresies.

Mar Aprem is famous for the austerity and sanctity of his life as well as for his learning. The inspiration of his writings is scriptural throughout. His style, characterised by repetitions and accumulation of metaphors, was much appreciated by his Syrian poetry, he is the pioneer genius, the

master, often imitated but never equalled. Among his many varied literary productions are the hymns and refutations of heretics. One of his favourite subjects was the Last Judgement, which he has described in terrifying colours. His prose writings are only the commentaries on the Bible and polemic literature.

Syriac poetry reached its zenith in the time of Mar Aprem. Scholars are of opinion that the twelve syllabled (dodeca syllabic) metre was introduced to Syriac poetry by Mar Aprem. However the most favourite of Mar Aprem is hepta syllabic (seven syllabled), which is consequently called after him. The four syllabled and five syllabled metres are also often found in his poetry.

Mar Aprem introduced acrostics into Syriac poetry, in imitation of some Hebrew poems, each strophe of which began with a letter of the alphabet. He used acrostics not only with the letters of the alphabet, but also with the letters of his name and of some other names like Jesus. On Sunday morning we sing *Thisbohtha* (hymn) made by Mar Aprem. There are ten strophes for this praise which begins with the words "*Isho Maran Mshikha*". The initial letters of these ten strophes spell the name "*Isho Mshikha*".<sup>1</sup>

The metrical works of Mar Aprem are grouped *Memrae* (homilies or discourses), *Madrashae*

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1. *Khudra* Vol. I, Mar Narsai Press, Trichur, p. 104.

(dissertations or instructions), *Sogiatha* (songs), *Bavatha* (rogations) *Oniatha* (responsories), *Seblatha* (Stairs or scales) and *Thisbhatha* (glorifications or praises). The *memrae* are hymns consisting generally of equal strophes of seven syllabled verses.

Between the years 350 and 370 Mar Aprem composed a book of great historical interest entitled "Hymns relating to the city of Nisibis" edited by Bickell in 1866. These poems deal in greater part with the history of Nisibis and its bishop and of adjacent cities such as Hanzit, Edessa and Harran. His hymns on *Dinkha* (Epiphany), *Yalda* (Christmas), Lent etc., are some of the examples of his literary genius.

"Prophet of the Syrians" is another title given to this holy man. The Holy Apostolic Church of the East and the other Syrian Churches, from the ancient times onwards, honour him as their common Doctor and father. He is known as "the pillar of the church", "the Orator of the Syrians", "the Sun of the Syrians", "the Beacon of learning", the Great Malpan", and "Aprem the Great".

Mar Aprem wrote exclusively in Syriac, but his works were translated into Armenian and Greek, at a very early date, and via the latter into Latin and Slavonic. Now Mar Aprem's writings are found in Syriac, Latin, Greek, Armenian, Arabic, Slavonic, Ethiopic, Coptic, French, English and

other languages. Today the scholars extol in very high terms the sublimity of Mar Aprem's poetic genius, rhetorical talent and theological erudition.

The great libraries of the world have bought many of the Syriac manuscripts of Mar Aprem. The Vatican Library (Rome), the British Museum (London), the Bodleian Library (Oxford) University Library (Cambridge), the Bibliotheque Nationale (Paris) etc., contain some of these rare Syriac manuscripts.

There is no satisfactory edition of the writings of Mar Aprem. The standard collection is said to be the 3 volumes of Syriac texts edited by J. S. Assemani, S. E. Assemani and P. B. Mobarek in Rome (1732-1746). J. J. Overbeck published an incomplete Syriac edition in 1865 at Oxford. Among the English translations available at present we have "Metrical Hymns and Homilies" translated" by H. Burgess in 2 volumes (1835) "Select works of S. Ephraim the Syrian" by J. B. Morris (1847), "The prose refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan" in 2 volumes edited by C. W. Mitchell (1912-1921) and "The Commentary on Acts" edited by F. C. Conybeare (1926).

The details connected with the life and work of Mar Aprem are shrouded in obscurity and uncertainty. The greatest difficulty is concerning the period prior to the time he left Nisibis.

Professor Arthur Voobus of America, one of the few Syriac scholars of today, admits that "it is impossible to separate truth from fiction".<sup>2</sup> A critical sifting of source materials made Professor Voobus to conclude thus.

All the stories about his trips from Orhai to Egypt, his stay among the Egyptian monks and the contacts he made with the leading authorities there, his journey to Caesarea in Cappadocia, and his travels in the Mesopotamian communities, are valueless for historical study. This is the retouched picture of Aphrem of legend.<sup>3</sup>

During the commemoration of the sixteen hundredth anniversary of the death of Mar Aprem, Professor Voobus paid tribute to the literary achievements of this great Syrian saint. Calling Mar Aprem a pioneer in literary field Professor Voobus substantiates his observation as follows:

He set an example in many areas of literary creation: exegetical, theological, ethical-paraenetical, polemical, homiletic and ascetic, prose as well as poetry. An enormous outburst of literary works like this must have had an epochmaking effect. An incalculable incentive was engendered by this

2. A. Voobus; "Aphrem and the school of Urhai" *Ephrem-Hunayn Festival*, 1974, p. 216.

3. *Ibid*, pp. 216, 215.

giant among the Syrian authors, a man who stands without a rival in the rank of the most outstanding authors the Syrians can call their own.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately for us, the last will, the Testament of Mar Aprem, has come down to us. It is a great help for us to know a lot of details and some names of his disciples of renown such as Aba, Zeninob, Mara, Abraham, Paulona and others. Professor Voobus comments about the importance of this document as follows:

The purpose of such a document in itself seems to be quite natural, when we consider his intentions. Not only his wish-growing out of his humility to have the simplest possible funeral, but several other things lay on his heart. It is so natural that he was concerned about his spiritual legacy and the bearers of it — his disciples and adherents. Thus, as far as the quintessence is concerned, it fits in well with everything we know of Aphrem. The poetical form, the seven syllable metre of which Aphrem was particularly fond, and the whole cast of the lyrics are in the vein of Aphrem.<sup>5</sup>

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4. *Ibid*, p. 212.

5. *Ibid*, p. 211.

Mar Aprem is one of the useful authorities to prove that as back as the fourth century there was already a strong tradition that St. Thomas the apostle did his missionary labours in India. It is indeed a significant contribution to our study of St. Thomas Christians in India, because there are not many undisputed historical sources supporting this tradition prior to the fourth century. "In India are thy miracles O Thomas." "The sunburnt India thou hast made fair, the tainted mind of dark people thou hast purified." "The cross of light has obliterated India's darkened shades."

Mar Aprem had compassion on human race at the time of famine. He asked "How long will you refuse to bring into your memories the loving kindness of God? How long will you allow your wealth, which is corruptible, to be the means of the accusation and condemnation of your souls?" Then the people of Edessa took counsel, and said unto him "There is no man whatsoever whom we can trust to relieve the wants of those who are dying of hunger; for all the people are crafty and they act in a lying fashion concerning affairs of this kind." Mar Aprem seeing the concern of the lay people for the poor and needy replied, "For behold, for your sakes, I will see myself apart to become the keeper of a house for receiving strangers." Then Mar Aprem collected money, and he began to fence off in the streets places which were

suitable for his purpose; and he provided with great care 300 beds, some of which were intended for those who, it was thought, would live, and, in short, he brought in from the villages which were outside the city all those whom famine had stricken and put them to bed, and everyday he performed for them with the greatest possible solicitude the constant service of which they were in need, (paying for the same) with the money which came to him, and he rejoiced by means of those who supported him in the matter.

He died in June 373 A. D. The church of the East is celebrating the Feast of Mar Aprem on the "Memorial Day of Syriac Malpans", which falls in February. In the west, the feast Day of Mar Aprem was formerly on February 1, but since 1920 when he was declared by the Pope a Doctor of the church, it is on 18th June.

## MAR DIODORUS OF TARSUS

One of the three Greek Doctors venerated by the Church of the East is Mar Diodorus, known in English as "Diodore of Tarsus." Though his name is mentioned at least once a day during prayer in our churches, his history is not much known to most of us. His name is repeated in the litany of our liturgy. The other churches do not consider him as a church Father. So he is obscure. But we have no excuse to be ignorant of the history of this Greek Father of our church.

It is interesting to note that the Memorial day of the Greek Fathers coincide with the Memorial Day of the Syriac Fathers in some years such as 1972. But in 1973 they happened to be on two different Fridays, Greek on February 9 and Syriac on February 23. The coming date in February 1976 are also different, Greek on 13 and Syriac on 20.

Diodore was a native of Antioch, educated at Athens. He was a champion and defender of the Nicene creed and opposed to the teaching of the

heretic Arius. His contributions as the Head of the theological school at Antioch are immense. In 373 A. D. he became the bishop of Tarsus and the metropolitan of the then undivided province of Cilicia. He participated in the Council of Antioch (379 A. D.). He was the teacher of St. Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia.

Diodore of Tarsus was greatly respected as the defender of the true Apostolic faith and protector of the Church from the two main dangers of the 4th century, i. e., the teachings of the heretics Arius and Apollinarius. The orthodoxy of Diodore is evident from the attitude of the Emperor. The Emperor Theodosius I, in his decree dated July 30, 381 A. D. named Diodore as one of the Orthodox Eastern prelates, communion with whom was the test of orthodoxy.

Diodore wrote many books which were later destroyed as his enemies accused him of being Nestorian. Sozomen, the Church Historian, tells that Diodore did not use allegory in his interpretation. Perhaps his insistence on the perfect humanity of Christ against the Apollinarian position, made the later students of history suspect Diodore as a "Nestorian before Nestorius".

From Sozomen<sup>1</sup> we know that Diodore was opposed to allegory and insisted on the complete

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1. A fragment of this work is preserved by Leontius of Byzantium in his *C. Nestor-et. Eutyeb.*, B. G. IXXXVI. 1368 B (Cf Sellers: *op cit*; p. 174).

humanity of Christ over against the Apollinarian teaching. He also attacked the school of Alexandria. In his work *Contra Synousiastas*, Diodore says:

The divine Logos did not undergo two births, one before the ages, the other in these last days.....

In any discussion concerning the births according to nature, it must not be thought that the divine Logos is Son of Mary.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Diodore opposed any idea suggesting that the divine nature of Christ had its beginning from the Virgin. He insisted that the divine Logos did not experience a human birth.

Is it not an irony of history that the champion of the doctrines of the first two ecumenical councils was considered posthumously as the originator of the doctrine condemned in the so-called third ecumenical council of 431 A. D. at Ephesus?

The exact date of his death is unknown. He is believed to have been dead by 394 A. D. At the time of his death his torch of true teaching was kept aflame by his disciple Theodore of *Mopsuestia*.

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2. *A History of the Church*, English translation, London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1846, p. 376.

## VI

### MAR YAKOB M'PASKA (d. 422)

One of the greatest Assyrians of the fifth century is Mar Yakob M'paska. The Syriac word 'Mpaska' means the one who is cut to pieces. He was a brave general, who came from a noble family of Beth Lapat, the famous capital city.

The details of his early history are not known. He and his wife were Christians. King Yezdgaard of Persia was pleased with him. The King used to give him many gifts. After the death of Yezdgaard, his son Warharan succeeded to the throne. In the second year of his reign, Mar Yakob was attracted by the royal gifts and renounced the God of the Christians. The matter was announced in the streets.

When the news concerning this blasphemous action was made known his wife and mother who were devout Christians wrote to him condemning his deed. They warned him against this action. They informed him that they had nothing to do with him as he had renounced the true faith.

This letter opened his eyes. He began to think that if his wife and mother had deserted him, his God also would turn his face from him. Immediately he returned to his tent and read the Scriptures. He began to repent for his backsliding.

When other backsliders saw him in meditation, they reported the matter to the King. Yakob was summoned to the King's presence. The King queried whether he was a Christian. The brave man replied in the affirmative. The King further questioned him "Were you not a Magi (worshippers of fire)? The reply was a "No". The King then asked "Did you not receive gifts from my father due to your fire worship?" The brave man retorted "Where is that King now?"

This retort infuriated the King. He thought of various cruel methods to persecute him. He warned Yakob that it would not be an ordinary death if he did not renounce Christian faith. Yakob replied the King that all his words were useless. They would be like wind that hits hard rock. The King reminded him that his ancestors in this faith had been killed by various cruel means. But Yakob retorted by saying that his only prayer was that he should die as they had died.

After such an exchange of words between them the King condemned Yakob to death. The magicians of the King advised that his death should not be a simple one. They decided that the ten

fingers of his hand and the toes of his legs should be cut one by one. Then the palms of his hands and his feet should be sliced. His hands should be sawed off and then his thighs. After cutting off each limb likewise he should be beheaded.

He was taken to the place of execution as soon as his death sentence was pronounced. The police were standing ready to accompany him. The faithful believers began to lament over this cruel fate of Yakob.

At the spot of martyrdom, Yakob requested his executioners to permit him to praise the person for whom he was being persecuted. He turned to the east. Fixing his eyes on the heaven he knelt. "Lord, hear the request of thy weak servant, Yakob. Strengthen thy servant at this moment. Save the son of thy handmaiden who prays to thee. Show a good sign so that I will be counted in the company of all those persecuted and afflicted because of thee. Let my enemies be put to shame seeing that I too am crowned like those martyrs who became victorious due to Thy strength. Let my enemies be put to shame when I am crowned like those who were martyred for loving Thee. Because thou hast helped and comforted me."

Immediately they laid hands on him. They were impatient to cut him into pieces. They asked him to think twice whether his body should be

demolished into small pieces or escape this death by one word. The nobles present there wept looking at his beautiful body and his firm stand. They said with one voice "Don't destroy your body. Live by pleasing the King. Later you can return to your religion." But the brave man replied that they should not cry for him. They should cry for themselves. By small worldly comforts, they were inheriting eternal damnation.

The executioner got angry at the words of Yakob. He commanded the soldiers to cut his fingers. They began to lacerate the thumb of his right hand. When the thumb was removed the blessed man proclaimed "Saviour of the Christians, by Thy mercy receive this branch of the tree which is my body. Although it is cut by the hands of those who prune the vine it will sprout in the spring and be crowned." Hearing this the executioner cried and told the blessed man "Only one finger is cut. It is enough. If you wish you can cure it with medicines. Don't destroy your beautiful body. You have plenty of money to give away to the poor. You can save your soul by gifts to the poor. Please live. Don't die." The blessed man responded by saying that the vine would be pruned in winter. But it would grow better later. As there are changes in the vine, the believer will sprout again in the safe hands of God. Then they cut another of his fingers. After finishing the fingers of the right hand they started with fingers on his left hand.

After removing each and every part of his limbs the noble men kept on repeating their request to Yakob to save himself. But he did not acquiesce. When all his limbs were removed his body fell on the ground. He opened his mouth and uttered words of praise of God. "I am fallen in thy presence like a building which is demolished from the foundation. Now only the roof remains. Lord I beseech thee to release my soul from the prison in order to confess Thy name.....". As soon as he said Amen, one of the executioners stepped forward and beheaded him. Mar Yakob died peacefully entrusting his soul to the Lord.

The martyrdom took place on Friday 27th *Thishrin Khrai* (November) during the second year of the reign of the Persian King Warharan in 422 A. D. The Christians collected a huge sum of money and presented it to the police to get his body. But the police did not allow them to take his body. But at 9 o'clock (3 p. m.) when they moved away from there, the Christians removed his trunk and hid it until dark. The same evening, they collected all the pieces of the body. The twenty eight pieces were placed in a basket. They recited secretly the fifty first psalm. Suddenly fire descended from heaven and encircled that basket. It consumed his blood. The limbs began to glow. The believers praised God for this miracle.

## VII

### MAR THEODORUS (d. 428 A. D.)

One of the most profound theologians approved by our church is Mar Theodorus, usually known in English as Theodore of Mopsuestia. Mar Theodorus, who was the bishop of Mopsuestia, was given the title "The Interpreter" (*Mpashkana*.) It is interesting to note that the Interpreter of the Church of the East is one of the three Greek Doctors. Our church owes a great debt to the Bible commentaries and theological treatises of Mar Theodorus.

The second order of our *Holy Qurbana* is known as the order of Mar Theodorus.<sup>1</sup> His commentaries were the standard text-books in the famous theological College at Nisibis, founded by Mar Narsai and Mar Barsauma Metropolitan of Nisibis. Much of the Christology of Nestorius can be traced back to Mar Theodorus. In spite of the greatness of this Interpreter, it is a matter of regret

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1. This is used on Sunday, beginning with the first Sunday of Advent till the Palm Sunday.

to realise how little we know about this great Father.

He was born at Antioch around 350 A. D. in a wealthy family. He studied rhetoric at Antioch under Libanius; but in 369 he went to the monastery of Diodore at Antioch and studied there for about ten years. In 392 he became Bishop of Mopsuestia where he worked for 36 years. He fought against Apollinarianism. In 394 he was present in Constantinople on the occasion of the Synod held to decide a question concerning the see of Bostra in the Patriarchate of Antioch. Emperor Theodosius II had declared that he had never heard of such a teacher as Theodore. Theodosius II was often in correspondence with him.

St. Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople, was a fellow-student of Theodore when they were studying under Diodore. St. Chrysostom has written about the early life of his bosom friend Theodore. According to the same source we understand that Theodore led an ascetic life and his days were spent in reading and his nights in prayer, that his fasts were long and his bed was the bare ground. While Chrysostom was in exile (404—407) he wrote that he could never forget the love of Theodore, so genuine and warm, so sincere and guileless, a love maintained from early years".

He died in 428, the year in which Nestorius became the Patriarch of Constantinople. His fame spread even after his death. Cyril of Alexandria, who was an opponent of the theology of Theodore, advised against the condemnation of Theodore, as the eastern bishops held him in great esteem. The bishops of Syria had openly declared "We had rather be burnt than condemn Theodore". Though hated by many Western theologians, Theodore was venerated by the Church of the East.

One of the eminent historians of our church, Barhadhbeshabba, wrote of Theodore in the following terms. "He astonished the world with his books not only in his life time but also after his death.....When other bishops came near him, they considered themselves as mere pupils, and philosophers subtle in reasoning, were before him as students". Meshihazkha, another writer, states:

At that time shone in all branches of knowledge the truly divine man St. Theodore the Interpreter, who was the first to explain philosophically and rationally the economy of the divine mysteries of the truth and the passion of our Lord.

The first Synodical pronouncement in support of Theodore of Mopsuestia in the Church of the East was in the year 596 A. D. The Synod of Patriarch Sabrisho declares:

We reject and anathematize all those who do not adhere to the commentaries, the traditions and the teachings of the eminent Doctor, the blessed Theodore, the interpreter; and who endeavour to introduce new and foreign doctrines saturated with errors and blasphemies, which are in contradiction to the true and exact teaching of this saint and of all the orthodox Doctors, head of the schools, who have followed in his steps, corroborated his doctrine and taught the true faith of the incorruptible orthodoxy in our eastern region.

He too, like his teacher and predecessor, was greatly respected in his life time. In "The Lives of illustrious Men", Gennadius states that Theodore was "a cautious investigator and clever of tongue."<sup>2</sup> According to the same source, Theodore wrote against Apollinarians and Anomians.<sup>3</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, the church historian, paints him in beautiful colour stating that he fought against "the forces of Arius and Eunomius, struggling against the piratical band of Apollinarius,

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2. Gennadius; *De Viris Illustribus*, Ch XII

3. Anomians are the extreme Arians of the 4th century, so called from their doctrine that the Son was totally unlike (avovoios) the Father. Their leaders were Actius and Eunomius (F L. Cross(ed)), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, London: Oxford University Press, 1958. p. 58.

and finding the best pasture for God's sheep." " His influence in the East was great; for one often heard the cry: "We believe as Theodore believed; long live the faith of Theodore!" " 5

Nevertheless, in 553 A. D., he was branded as a terrible heretic, when the 'Three Chapters' were condemned in the Second Council of Constantinople. Mingana describes this event in the following terms:

Given free rein the outbursts of the Cyrillian bishops of the Council knew no bounds. Expressions such as "impious", "blasphemous", "heretical", were continuously hurled against a man dead one hundred and twenty years previously. 6

In his "Commentary on the Nicene Creed", we have a fairly good account of his christology. He deals with the economy of the humanity of our Lord in the following words:

And in order to show as how He came down they said: *And became a man.* He did not humble Himself here by an ordinary

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4. Theodoret; Ecclesiastical History, Ch. XXXIX, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Library, Second Series, Vol. II, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956, p. 159.

5. A. Mingana; *Commentary of Theodore of Mospsuestia on the Nicene Creed*, Woodbrooke Studies, Vol. V, Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1932, p. 3.

6. *Ibid*, p. 6.

act of Providence nor by the gift of the assistance of (Divine) power that He had in the same way as He performed many other things, but He assumed and put on our nature in which He was, and in which dwelt so that He might perfect it with sufferings and unite it to Him. In this they (our blessed Fathers) showed us the gift of His grace which he assumed a man from us, was in Him, and they taught us that He endured and bore all accordingly to human nature so that we might understand that he was not man in appearance only, but that He was a real man who suffered all the human (passions) according to human nature.<sup>7</sup>

In his main theological work, *On the Incarnation of the Lord*.<sup>8</sup> Theodore repudiated the charge that God dwelt in Christ as He dwelt in apostles and righteous men:

In Him towards whom He showed His good pleasure He dwelt as in a Son (*vosen hius*) - that is to say, He united, the Man assumed entirely to Himself, and fitted Him to share with Him in all the honour which He, the indweller, who is Son by nature possesses.<sup>9</sup>

7. *Ibid*, p. 73.

8. This work, in 5 books consisting of 15,000 verses was styled as *Against the Incarnation* by an ecclesiastical opponent, a century later.

9. *De. Incarn*, VII. (quoted from Sellers; *op. cit*; p. 133)

The Synod held in 605 A. D. under the Patriarchate of Gregory I, declares as follows:

We all assembled in this Synod have decided that each of us should receive and accept all the commentaries and works written by the blessed Theodore the interpreter, bishop of Mopsuestia, a man by the grace of God set over the treasures of the two Testaments.....All our venerable Fathers who have handed down this true faith to us, in their teaching, from his day to our own, have studied his writings and adhered to his statements.

His commentaries on Nicene Creed, Lord's prayer, Baptism and Eucharist have been translated from Syriac to English by Alphonso Mingana. Let us pray God to use us for the teaching and propagation of the word of God, in the same way as the blessed Mar Theodorus of Mopsuestia interpreted the divine truths for the people and became worthy of the title 'interpreter'.

## VIII

### JOHN NESTORIUS (d. 451 A. D.)

One of the three Greek Fathers of the Church of the East, Nestorius has come to be considered as one of the most prominent Fathers. However, we should never forget the fact that Nestorius came from Antioch and worked in Constantinople as their Patriarch and he had nothing to do with our church. He did not know our ecclesiastical language. Still the faith for which he became a martyr was defended and confessed by the Church of the East and it is our duty to remember this great man who suffered a lot due to the enmity of the jealous bishop of Alexandria.

Nestorius was a native of Germanicia, a city in Syria, at the foot of mount Taurus. He was brought up and educated at Antioch. So, in lineage and tradition, he was an Antiochene. He became a monk at the monastery of Euprepus, near Antioch, and was famous for his eloquence as a

preacher, and according to some, for the austerity of his life.

His reputation reached far beyond the Antiochene Patriarchate. When the Patriarchate in Constantinople became vacant in December 427, Emperor Theodosius appointed Nestorius whom the people thought to be a second Chrysostom from Antioch because of his orthodoxy, erudition and eloquence. The Emperor states:

Him I sent for and took by causing sorrow to his whole city and I brought him hither for your advantage.

At the time of his consecration as the Patriarch of Constantinople on 10th April 428, Nestorius addressed the Emperor in the following famous words:

Give me, my prince, the earth purged of heretics, I will give you heaven as a recompense. Assist me in destroying heretics, and I will assist you in vanquishing the Persians.

The fashion of his day was to crush the heretics for the preservation of faith. As an inheritor of the theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus, Nestorius could not keep quiet and allow the continuance of the condemned heresies such as Arianism and Apollinarianism. While taking severe steps against the heretics, he

also took great care to instruct his people in the orthodox doctrines of the church.

The over-enthusiasm of Nestorius in overthrowing the heretics created many enemies who worked against him at the time of the Council of Ephesus in 431 A. D. As far as Nestorius was concerned he was doing his duty.

In the unfortunate controversy over the term *Theotokos*, Mother of God, Nestorius was attacked by Cyril of Alexandria. Finally Nestorius became the victim. He did not accept the verdict of the Council of Cyril. Still he returned from his bishopric and went to his monastery in Antioch from where he was banished in 435 by Emperor Theodosius II. His death probably took place in 451 in the desert. Before his death he wrote the famous book *Bazaar of Heracleides*, which was brought to the attention of the western world in the last decade of the last century.

There were many causes for the downfall of Nestorius. One was the enmity with the Pope due to Nestorius' apparent protection of the Pelagians. Another was the jealousy of Cyril of Alexandria against the growing influence of the See of Constantinople. Last but not the least, his disfavour with the ladies of the Court proved to be rather fateful. Though he had the support of Emperor Theodosius II at the early part of the

controversy, he could not get any support from the royal ladies.

Some scholars hold that Nestorius is not a systematic thinker. A corrective to their notion is given by an English theologian, Leonard Hodgson: "Nestorius has been called a confused thinker, but careful study of the *Bazaar of Heracleides* makes it clear that whatever he was, he was certainly not that." It is a pity that most of the churches misunderstood his theology. Nestorius was forsaken by his people and he died in exile. However, his arguments have prevailed. He advised against the use of the title Mother of God and taught that Virgin Mary was Mother of Christ, who was both God and man. Since the Reformation, the Protestant churches have begun to use the title for which Nestorius fought a good fight. The title for which Cyril of Alexandria created all the confusion in the 5th century has somehow disappeared from the prayer books of millions of Protestant Christians.

The greatness of Nestorius was evident from his decision to withdraw voluntarily from the church activities. As his last words show, he never wanted to work for his own glory, but for God's:

My dearest desire is that God should be blessed in heaven and upon earth. As for

Nestorius let him remain anathema. God grant that while cursing me men may reconcile themselves with Him.

In spite of all the evils done to him, he wrote the last paragraph of his biography as follows:

Rejoice for me, O desert, my beloved and my foster-parent and the home of my habitation, and my mother the land of my exile, who even after my death will guard my body into the resurrection by the will of God. Amen.

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N. B. A detailed discussion on the christology of Nestorius is omitted here. It is in the M. Th. thesis of the author planned to be published in 1976.

## IX

### MAR NARSAI (d. 502)

Mar Narsai was a fellow worker of Mar Bar Sauma, the Metropolitan of Nisibis! Mar Narsai is highly esteemed in the Church of the East. He is known among them as the "Harp of the Holy Spirit." He was a professor in the famous seminary at Edessa. But when the Edessan Seminary was closed in 457 A. D. Narsai accompanied Mar Bar Sauma and founded the School of Nisibis, which became a great centre of learning of the Church of the East in the following centuries.

According to the Syrian historian Bar Hebraeus, Mar Narsai worked in Nisibis for fifty years. Mar Bar Sauma, the Metropolitan of that diocese, appointed Mar Narsai as the Principal of that famous Seminary. There he taught the doctrine of the Church. He defended our church from the Monophysite attacks. Therefore the Monophysites hated him. This is the reason why, the Monophysite historian, out of jealousy, called him Narsai,

the Leper. Whatever may be the feeling of the Monophysites, who had to face two great champions of truth, Mar Bar Suama and Mar Narsai, the writings of Mar Narsai bear testimony to the fact that he deserves the title "the Harp of the Holy Spirit."

His literary achievements are superb. Dr. William Wright, the famous Syriac scholar, says "He was a copious writer, especially in verse". Many of his poems were published by the well-known Chaldean priest Alphonso Mingana in two volumes at Mosul in 1905 A. D. However the English speaking world got the opportunity to read and appreciate this great literary genius only in 1909 A. D., when the Roman Catholic English monk Dom R. H. Connolly published an English translation of four of the homilies which deal with liturgical matters. Dom Connolly, a good Syriac scholar (the anonymous translator mentioned in Bethune Baker's Nestorius and his teachings) has given his comments on some of his theological points. Being a Roman Catholic monk he has expressed his hesitations to be associated with the theology of Mar Narsai, as the Roman Catholic version of the theology of Mar Narsai is that he was a Nestorian. However Mar Narsai's famous homilies on Sacraments like Baptism and Eucharist can be read and judged by the English knowing people. E. C. Whitaker has reproduced two of the

homilies from Dom Connolly in his book on the Documents of the baptismal Liturgy. As the English translation of the Liturgical Homilies of Mar Narsai is out of print it is necessary to have some books where the writings of Mar Narsai will be easily available to the English readers.

Mar Narsai was not lucky enough to belong to the earlier centuries. Had he been born as a contemporary of Mar Aprem or earlier, his writings would have been useful to all the churches of Christendom. But due to the denominational prejudices and false notion that the teachings of Mar Narsai are heretical, the theologians of the churches other than our own do not make much use of the works of Mar Narsai. It is true that some of his works have severely attacked the Monophysite teachings. But at the same time there are many of his works, which do not have a direct bearing on the theological differences. To an impartial critic many of the works of Mar Narsai are of paramount importance. If more of writings are translated into English, the modern theologians will be able to detect a theological star of first magnitude, shining from Nisibis, about which the Syrian writer Barhadhbeshabha says "Edessa was darkened, but Nisibis shone forth; and the dominions of the Romans were filled with error, but those of Persia with the knowledge of true religion."

Some of his works have been translated to German and French. According to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Mar Narsai wrote "an extensive set of commentaries on the Old Testament, but these appear to have completely lost." His book known as the "*Pushak Raze*"<sup>1</sup> (the explanation of the Holy Mysteries) is still the standard book to understand the Holy Communion. This book is taught in the Seminary of the Church of the East in modern times and the students of the present generation are benefitted by the scholarship of the famous Principal of the Seminary at Nisibis established almost fifteen centuries ago. Perhaps what the students study from this book today may be the same notes of the lectures given at the Seminary at Nisibis in the 5th century.

His theological position is clearly defined in a homily on the three Greek fathers accepted by the Church of the East; i. e. Diodore, Theodore, and Nestorius. In this work he declares that our Lord is in two natures (*Kyane*), two hypostases (*Knume*) and one person (*Parsopa*). This is a very clear and accurate statement of the Christological position of the Church of the East. He

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1. A Malayalam translation of the Syriac book *Pushak Raze*, translated by the Rev. P. D. Francis is being published in *Voice of the East* serially in 1975.

defended Saint Nestorius and stated without hesitation that Nestorius was betrayed for gold by the enemies of truth.

Much of the theological achievements of the patriarchate of Mar Babai (497-502) owes its credit to Narsai. There were no official confessions published by the Church of the East for about seventy years after the year 486.<sup>2</sup> It is true that we should make a distinction between the theology of the Church and the theology of theologians. Nevertheless, though only personal utterances of an individual, the poems of Narsai still exercise a tremendous influence in the Church of the East.

Needless to say that Narsai is against Cyril of Alexandria, like all the supporters of Nestorius. He writes: "said Cyril, why does he not call Mary 'Mother of the Godhead'? She who bore essential being in fleshly wise, in that He became flesh."<sup>3</sup>

He explains the two natures of Christ in the following poem:

Blame the evangelists, if blame you must,  
For their books express the distinction  
of the Word and the body.

2. Synod of Seleucia - Ctesiphon.

3. Narsai, *Mimra* x: 267 (of. Wigram W. A. An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church, London: SPCK, 1900, p. 271)



not the reader think, in reading 'Man', that I mean two sons, for the son is one indeed." <sup>6</sup>

A student of Narsai is attracted more often to the peculiarity of his style, especially when he writes in his favourite twelve metre. A special '*Qanona*' <sup>7</sup> on the distinctive actions of the two concrete and abstract natures of Christ has added further doubts in the minds of the students of Christology. This beautiful poem of great literary achievement and a fine piece of literary composition of Narsai is appreciated by the supporters of Narsai, but criticised by those who are opposed to the Christology of the Church of the East. After explaining his Christology as one '*Parsopa*', two '*Qnoma*' and two '*Kiane*', Narsai sings:

Thus does all the church of the Orthodox  
confess thus also have the approved doctors  
Of the church taught, Diodorus, and  
Theodorus, and Mar Nestorius.

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6. Ibid., (of Wigram; *op. cit.*, p. 272). These and many other passages of Narsai can be cited to prove the opposite of what Narsai was trying to emphasize. In some cases he had to overstate matters. That was the reason why this theological star of first magnitude was not accepted by the Western Church. Some of his overstatements, however, were necessary to defend the faith and in many cases he guarded the truth against the Eutychian tendencies. Wigram is right in pointing out that no statement of Narsai is more emphatically 'Nestorian' than those in the '*De Incarnatione*' of St. Athanasius of Alexandria. W. A. Wigram, *op. cit.*, p. 273).

7. A short prayer of thanksgiving and praise.

He was laid in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes as man, and the watchers extolled Him with their praises, as God.

He offered sacrifices according to the law, as man; and received worship from the Persians, as God.....

He kept the law completely as man: and He gave His own new law, as God...

He bore His cross upon His shoulder, as man; and He revealed and announced He cried out upon the cross 'My God; My God' as man; and He promised paradise to the thief, as God.....<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to find a proper English translation for the word '*Qnoma*'.<sup>9</sup> The other two words '*Kiana*' and '*Parsopa*' are properly translated as nature and person. If the word '*Qnoma*' is not used, then the Christology of one '*Parsopa*'

8. The complete text is given in R. H. Connolly the *Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*. Texts and studies, Vol. VIII, Cambridge: University Press, 1909, pp. 14 - 15. An elaboration of this poem is found in the Syriac book known as *Khudra* and an English translation is given in Badger; *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 35 - 38

9. Fr. Placid Podipara, the well known Indian Syriac scholar working in Rome, finds the same difficulty. He writes, "The first namely *Kiana*, is equivalent to the Greek *Phusis*. The other two *Qnoma* and *Parsopa* had their ambiguous significations just as their Greek counterparts hypostasis and prosopon" Fr. Placid Podipara. "The Christology of Babai the great or the non-Catholic East Syrians" or "The Nestorians." Unpublished paper. P. 1.

and two '*Kiana*' is identical with the Chalcedonian Christology. '*Qnoma*' makes it distinct from other Christological formularies.

In conclusion, Narsai, can be called "Nestorian" in the sense that he taught one person two '*Qnoma*' and two natures. It should be noted however, that the writings of Nestorius were not translated to Syriac until a few years after the death of Narsai. The authority to which Narsai would have based his Christological conclusion was no doubt, that of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the Greek theologian, who became accepted as the "Interpreter" of the Church of the East. Probably the Christology of Narsai should be more accurately called as Mopsuestian rather than Nestorian.<sup>10</sup>

He died probably in 502 A. D. Some writers say that his death took place in 503, or even 507. But I take 502 as it is printed on the title page of the Syriac book "*Pushak Raze*". (Printed by the late Rev. J. Kelaita at Mosul in 1928) Mar Narsai was only a priest at the time of his death. Still he is given the title "Mar" which is given in recognition of the greatness of this famous theologian to whom the Church of the East is indebted for her literary achievements.

10. Fr. William F. Macomber thinks this to be true of the Christology of Church of the East. Cf. W. F. Macomber S. J. "The Christology of the Synod of Seleucia Ctesiphon A. D. 486" '*Orientalia Christiana Periodica*', Vol. Nos. 1-2 Rome, 1958 p. 133 note 4.

## X

### MAR ABA CATHOLICOS (d. 554)

Mar Aba the Great has been considered as one of the greatest patriarchs of our Church. He has been described by a historian as a "glorious confessor of the faith, the light of the Persian Church, to which he left the double treasure of blameless doctrine and a model life!" Even the Roman Catholic historian Dr. Fortescue has agreed that he was an excellent prelate. Though he is not counted as a great literary figure like Mar Narsai and Mar Aprem, his literary genius is clearly evident in his writings. But it was his life that gave him the great place and honour among the Patriarchs of our Church.

As a youth he was against Christianity. He was a Zoroastrian and must have worshipped the God of Fire. The story told of his conversion is a clear proof of his antichristian attitude as St. Paul was before his conversion. But God who turned Saul of Tarsus to become an Apostle made this

Zoroastrian youth to become Christian and serve the Holy Catholic Apostolic Church of the East in its highest office.

The name Aba is the Syriac word for father. It is pronounced as Ava, because there is a dot below the second letter 'b'. Since Aba was Zoroastrian he must have had a different name before he became a Christian. Cosmas Indico-pleustes who visited India was a contemporary of Mar Aba and refers to him as Patrikios. It is nearer in meaning to the Persian name Papakan. It is possible that Aba did not want to disclose that he was Zoroastrian. Therefore he changed his Persian name Papakan.

Although he was a zealous Zoroastrian he was probably not Magian by caste. About his employment the "*Life of Mar Aba*" states that he was 'arzabad' to the registrar of the *hamargard* of Bait Arami. The meaning of these terms is not clear. He was probably an assistant in the Land Survey office of the Government. A recent scholar remarks "This would explain Aba's interest in geography, as indicated by Cosmas, and we have already seen what importance Khusrau I attached to the just collection of the land tax."

After receiving baptism at Herta (Al-Hirab) from a teacher named Joseph, he went to Nisibis

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1. William Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, p. 61.

to study at the famous theological Seminary founded by Mar Bar-Sauma Metropolitan and Mar Narsai. Afterwards he went to Edessa where he studied Greek language under a teacher named Thomas. It was this teacher who helped Mar Aba to translate the liturgy of Mar Nestorius and Mar Theodore the Interpreter from the Greek language to the Syriac language. From Edessa he went to Constantinople between 525 and 533 A. D. There he had to face another difficulty. It was the place where Mar Nestorius was the Patriarch for a short period (428 to 431 A. D.). Though a century had passed, anti-Nestorian feeling was still prevalent in Constantinople. Mar Aba was asked to condemn Theodore of Mopsuestia (known as the Interpreter) and other Nestorian teachers. But he refused to do it. He upheld the faith of our fathers, which is older than the time of Mar Nestorius. As their lives were in danger Mar Aba had to escape with his teacher Thomas from Constantinople. Thus they reached Nisibis.

At Nisibis Mar Aba became a famous teacher and a zealous evangelist. He exhibited his zeal for evangelistic work even during his student days in the Seminary at Nisibis. When he was only a student in the Seminary he quitted his studies for a time; He went with a professor of the Seminary newly consecrated as Bishop, to the diocese of Arzun, converted many pagans and

returned to complete his theological course. What a great example: We should ask ourselves at this point whether we feel the same urgency to convert the non-Christians as it was felt in the mind of that student of theological Seminary of Nisibis? Or do we not appreciate and approve such labours? Mar Aba puts us the challenge for a re-thinking in our attitude towards the missionary responsibilities of our Church.

In the year 536 A. D. he was chosen to the Patriarchate of the Church of the East to succeed Mar Poulouse whose Patriarchate was very short. During the following sixteen blessed years of his Patriarchate, he travelled to the various centres of his Patriarchate and put down the abuses including some which some Christians had begun to copy from their gentile neighbours. He held reforming synods. His synod of 544 A. D. is one of the important Synods of our Church. Mar Abdisho of 14th century has preserved it in his codification of synods. A French translation of this synod of Mar Aba is found as the sixth synod in the book called *Synodicon Orientale* edited by J.B. Chabot at Paris in 1911. Mar Aba was strongly against the marriage of bishops, nuns, monks *et al.*

Mar Aba was a strict disciplinarian. Soon after he became the patriarch of the Church of the East in January or February 540 A. D., he toured the areas of disputes with his colleagues and

made firm decisions. At Rivardshir where there were two rival bishops, Elizha and Narsai, he dismissed both and appointed another worthy man. At Gundeshapur there was an irregularly appointed Metropolitan named Abraham. He had sold church plate and given the money to prostitutes. This immoral Metropolitan attempted to get the patriarch on his side. But the Holy Mar Aba made Abraham to sign acceptance of his own deposition. These instances show how firm and zealous he was for justice and truth. The following observation made by a Protestant bishop in Pakistan in his Ph. D. thesis is worth recording.

Mar Aba was probably the most capable and prudent of the Patriarchs of the Church of the East, both in his exercise of church discipline, and in his relations with the State; he was certainly the most saintly of the great patriarchs. One of his diplomatic gifts seems to have been a good sense of humour, and in spite of his repeated sufferings there was a buoyancy in the man. He was ready to suffer all kinds of hardship rather than accept a position where the Church's right to evangelise was barred.<sup>2</sup>

His literary achievements are also not a little. He has written some hymns which we use in our night prayer on Tuesdays found in P. 126 in our

2. William G. Young. *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, p. 59.

*Kdamwather* (Prayer book). This hymn of ten syllable verses begins as follows. "Heaven and earth and all that are in them are not adequate to praise Thy being, O Existence which is Maker of all things." The famous Syriac scholar Dr. Wright writes about Mar Aba that he "seems to have been a man of great talent and versatility as he mastered both the Greek and Syriac languages."<sup>3</sup>

On the authority of Mar Abdisho Metropolitan we can state that Mar Aba was a great writer, though all his books are not extant now. The relevant passage of Mar Abdisho can be translated as follows:- "Mar Aba, the Great, interpreted and translated the whole of the Old Testament from the language of the Greeks to this Syriac language. He has written traditions (probably Commentaries) of Genesis, and of Psalms, and of Proverbs, and of Romans, and of two (Epistles) to Corinthians and of the three following Epistles (Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians) and of the Epistle to the Hebrews. He has the discourses and the homilies and canons of the whole of David (psalms); the synodical Epistles, on the order of the history of the Church administrative canons and ecclesiastical laws."<sup>4</sup>

Persecution was awaiting this Patriarchate. As a result of a war against the Persian empire in

3. Wright, *History of Syriac Literature*, p. 116.

4. *Marganeetha*. Mosul, 1924, p. 70.

540-545 A. D. there was a persecution of the Christians. As a matter of fact this was not as fierce as the persecution of the 4th century under Sapor II. Mar Aba was banished by King Khosrau I to Azerbaijan. The King destroyed the Church near his palace in Seleucia.

In 549 while Mar Aba was living in exile in Azarbaijan, a deposed priest named Peter Gurganara ("the wolf"?) conspired with the Zoroastrian priests and brought a false letter pretending to have been written by the Shah to Faruk-Atur in Azarbaijan demanding the deposition of all the bishops and the clergy ordained by Mar Aba, who was an apostate Zoroastrian. The local authorities doubted the authenticity of this letter and refused to take action. Therefore Peter tried a night attack on the house where the Patriarch had been imprisoned. But the assailants were detected and repulsed before the crime was committed.

Mar Aba realised that he would be murdered sooner or later. There was already a rumour that he was killed while trying to escape from the prison. Then he decided to escape not to any place of hiding but to the capital city to meet the Shah. During a night in midwinter Mar Aba with one disciple and guided by the bishop of Azarbaijan escaped from Faruk-Atur. His whereabouts of the year 550 - 551 had been recorded in the Arabic *Chronicle* of Sa'ard as follows:

Mar Aba presented himself at the King's court. The King, informed of his arrival, sent him a written message: "Were you not obliged to remain in the place to which I exiled you?" "If I have run away", replied the Father,... "it was to avoid a violent death. If I had been put to death in secret, against whom could one have taken legal action?.....If the King wishes, he can have me put to death....." "Get out!" said the King.<sup>5</sup>

At the capital city of Ctesiphon Mar Aba took sanctuary in a Zoroastrian temple. The Shah allowed him to go and rest in his house. But when the patriarch left his place of refuge, the Magians captured him. The Shah sent a message forbidding the murder of the patriarch. Instead he was chained by the neck, arms and legs and imprisoned in a palace prison.

In the spring of 550 A. D. when the Shah went to Azarbaijan he took with the army, the patriarch and his disciple as prisoners. The patriarch was offered his freedom provided he gave an undertaking not to make converts from Magian religion. When the patriarch refused to yield to the royal wish, his chains were made heavier. When the Shah returned to the capital after a 1400

5. CS 2:27, P. O. - 7:159 - 160, 7. pp 280 - 289 quoted from William G. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 1974, p. 69.

mile journey he was kind enough to order for the removal of the chains from the patriarch. He was, however, ordered to continue to live in a prison house. The officers did not remove the chains. In the spring of 551 A. D. when the Shah was to embark on a journey for Fars, he sent an officer to remove the fetters of the patriarch.

Meanwhile an unfortunate incident took place. The eldest son of the Shah named Naushad (Anan-shangzad) heard a rumour that his father died, while he was sick. Without verifying the veracity of this news he proclaimed himself the Shah. Naushad was a Christian like his mother. King Khusrau had considered his eldest son Naushad unsuitable to be his successor. Nevertheless Naushad seized Bait Lapat (Gundeshapur) with the help of many local Christians.

The Magians took this opportunity to kill the patriarch. They chained him *to the neck of a soldier* and led him to the court of Shah. The Shah was annoyed and sent a message through a Christian servant Zadaju. Accusing the patriarch as being responsible for the rebellion of his Christian son, the Shah stated "For this reason, I am about to give immediate orders that your eyes should be put out, and that you should be thrown into a ditch and die there"! Later the wrath of the Shah was appeased. He sent another conciliatory message to the patriarch!

“It is my will”, said the King, that you write to the inhabitants of Gundeshapur not to side with this young madman.” The Catholicos wrote and excommunicated them. They separated themselves from the King’s son, and opened the gates of Gundeshapur to the King’s armies, which were then able to enter. The King and his men were amazed at this obedience, and this fear of excommunication.<sup>6</sup>

The Patriarch wrote to the Christians in Bait Lapat to be loyal to King Khusrau and not to his Christian son warning that all rebels will be put to death — Magians, Jews and Christians alike. Patriarch was given his full freedom.

It was at this time the White Huns wanted a bishop. They sent a priest as an emissary of their ruler Khudai to the Shah and the Patriarch. Shah was pleased, to know that Patriarch was the Head for the White Hun Christians too. The Shah ordered the Patriarch to consecrate the White Hun priest as Bishop for White Huns. He also wanted the church to be decorated as befitting on such an occasion. The patriarch’s return to his Cathedral in Seleucia after 8 years of absence was indeed a festive occasion to his Christian followers.

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6 C. S. 2:27, P. O. 7:163, 7 pp. 289-290, quoted from William Young, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

The Shah took the patriarch with him when he captured his son Naushad and mutilated him to make sure that he will not succeed his father. After returning to the capital the Shah allowed the Patriarch to reside near his palace in Seleucia. Many foreign dignitaries who visited the Shah visited the patriarch also. The patriarch did not enjoy such privileged position for long. Due to the imprisonment he had become a sick man. He was struck with paralysis. The Shah sent his personal physicians to attend on the patriarch. On 28th February, 552 the patriarch died. He was buried in Seleucia. We can conclude our study with a comment Bishop William Young of Pakistan makes about the brave career of Mar Aba.

The story of Mar Aba speaks for itself, and few additional comments are necessary. We are struck with the fact; that in spite of the tolerance of the Shah, the Patriarch was so often insecure, and almost, though not entirely, at the mercy of the Magians. This was chiefly due to the fact that he himself had been a convert; but it is also clear that Aba paid dearly for his insistence on the right of the Church to evangelise. At the same time we are struck by the fact that Aba was ready, in obedience to the Shah, to collect a fine from the Christians — behaviour which contrasts with that of

Shim'un bar Saba' and shows a readiness to be flexible in non-essentials. We are conscious too that Aba moved in a society where there were Christians at court, and where their numbers in the country were a challenge to a decadent Zoroastrianism. The concordat of 410 had not given freedom to proselytise followers of the State Religion, but if this could be won, Christianity might well become the dominant force in the country. Mar Aba did his best to ensure this, and his steadfastness of purpose compels our admiration.<sup>7</sup>

He is known as Mar Ava I to distinguish him from another Mar Ava who was Patriarch from 743 to 751 A. D. He is also referred to as Mar Ava the Great to distinguish him from Mar Ava II. Really he was great. Let the life of this pious missionary minded convert to Christianity be an example to all of us.

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7. *Ibid*, p. 72.

## XI

### **RABBAN ABRAHAM THE GREAT (491 - 586)**

The Church of the East is known as a church of great martyrs. It is also reputed for producing great many missionaries. The present chapter deals with another once glorious picture of the Church of the East. As we do not have monasteries at present, we do not know, much about the old monks who were mainly responsible for the glory of our church in the past, as a source of spirituality. Here we are going to have a look at one of these great monks.

Rabban Abraham was born in 491 or 492 A.D., in Mesopotamia at Kashkar, south of Seleucia Ctesiphon. He is said to have been baptised in 502 A. D., during the reign of Mar Babai, the Patriarch who died in 502 A. D. He was educated at Nisibis which had already earned high reputation as a great centre of learning under the leadership of Mar Narsai, "the Harp of the Holy Spirit."

Abraham was privileged to study at Nisibis under another Abraham, the nephew of Mar Narsai. After his education at Nisibis he went to a place called Herta where he converted some of the idolatrous natives to Christianity. Then he proceeded to the Egyptian desert to learn the rules of monastic life from that great centre, especially at Mount Sinai. After visiting various centres there Abraham returned to Nisibis to begin his monastic career.

At Mount Izla near Nisibis, Abraham began to dwell in secret. But his fame began to spread through his miracles. Thus he got disciples who later became founders of the monasteries in the lands of "the Babylonians, Persians and Assyrians." Multitudes of monks came to him from every quarter. Thus he restored the famous monastery of Mount Izla which was first established by Mar Augin. The great principles that were to guide all the monks of our church began to spread from here. Mar Abraham invented a distinguishing mark for the monks of our church to "have their heads shaved like a crown."

It is interesting to note that Mar Thoma, Bishop of Marga of the 9th century A. D., begins the history of the monks with Mar Abraham. He does not record the history of Mar Augin who brought monasticism from Egypt to Mesopotamia. He opens his first chapter saying:

Now as God of old brought out the blessed Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, and made him, by faith, the father of a multitude of nations, so also, he spread abroad and made to increase this holy habit of the solitary life in all the country of the East, by the hand of the spiritual man, worthy of Abraham in name, and country, and deed whom He established to be the father of the army of the virgins and men of abstinence." <sup>1</sup>

If Mar Augin is the first founder of the Monastic life of our church, Rabban Abraham is considered as the second founder. The later developments of the monastic movement owe its origin to Rabban Abraham of Kashkar. So he is rightly called Abraham the great because he is a great leader and "father of monks." He died at the very old age of 95 in 586 A. D. According to Wallis Budge the translator of the monastic history of Mar Thoma of Marga, the famous Roman Catholic scholar Assemani has confounded this Abraham with another Abraham of Kashkar who lived at Hazzah, near Arbil in Adiabene, where he lived until his death which took place thirty years later.

About his fame and prominence during his life time, Thomas of Marga records:

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1. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, pp. 37, 38.

And as formerly everyone who wished to learn and to become master of the heather philosophy of the Greeks went to Athens, the famous city of the philosophers, so in this case, everyone who desired to be instructed in spiritual philosophy went to the holy Monastery of Rabban Mar Abraham and inscribed himself in sonship to him.<sup>2</sup>

The life of Rabban Abraham the Great will be recorded for ever in the monastic history of our church. But he cannot rest content by seeing his name in the pages of history. What happened to the monastic life of the Church of the East? Where are the monasteries of Mount Izla and Beth Abhe? The present generation should be challenged by the life of Mar Abraham the Great and other holy monks who strengthened the spiritual life of our church in the past. If Abraham is the second founder of the monastic life of our church, we should ask who is going to be the third founder to restore the monastic life of our church to its ancient glory? Are there potential "Abrahams" among us today?

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2. *Ibid*, pp. 41, 42.

## XII

### MAR BABAI THE GREAT (d. 628)

Mar Babai is one of the greatest theologians of the Church of the East. After the death of Mar Narsai there was no significant theologian in the East Syrian Church until Mar Babai. He is in agreement with the theological thinking of Mar Narsai.

He was born in 569 A. D. He should not be confused with another Mar Babai, the abbot of Mount Izla in whose patriarchate the Church of the East is accused to have accepted the definite Nestorian doctrine in 497 A. D. The theologian Babai never became a Patriarch.

The most famous book of Mar Babai is the *Book of the Union*. In this book Babai rejected not only the Council of Ephesus of 431 A. D., but also the Council of Chalcedon of 451 A. D. Like other members of the Church of the East (Nestorian) Babai denied the title "*Theotokos*." He venerated

the three Greek doctors of the Church of the East, i.e., Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius of Antioch. He attacked both the Monophysites as well as the Khananians.

A very important passage in *De Unione* of Mar Babai tries to explain how the two natures are united in one person of Jesus Christ, who is God and man :

We apply the term *hypostasis* to the particular substance (ousia), which subsists in its own single being, numerically one and separate from the rest, not in so far as it is individualized, but in so far as, if it belongs to the class of things created, rational and free, it receives various properties....*Hypostasis* is invariable in respect of its own nature and in its kind (eidos) for the *nature* of the *hypostasis* is common to it and to all like hypostases.<sup>1</sup>

Babai then goes on to explain the word "person":

As to *person*, it is that characteristic of the *hypostasis* which distinguishes it from other *hypostasis*. The *hypostasis* of Paul is not the *hypostasis* of Peter.....And because the particular characteristic which the *hypostasis* possesses, is

1. Babai' *De Unione*, ch. XX apud; J. Labourt; *Le Christianisme dans l'empire perse*, pp. 283-5. Quoted from Bethune Baker, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-9.

not the *hypostasis* itself, the term *person* is used of that which makes the distinction.<sup>2</sup>

In *Khudra* we come across a famous anthem written by Babai beginning with the words "Brikh Khannana."<sup>3</sup> This anthem, which is sung in the Advent season until the epiphany,<sup>4</sup> speaks about Virgin Birth, two natures in the person of Christ etc.

Babai sings:

Blessed be the compassionate one, who has graciously sustained our life by the prophecies; for Isaiah saw, with the eye of his mind, the wonderful Virgin-born; and Mary brought forth Emmanuel, the son of God, without marriage. He being formed of her by the Holy Ghost, (as it is written) to be an adorable abode and temple for the rays of the Father, in one Filiation, which (body) at the commencement of his wonderful conception. He united to himself in our honour.....<sup>1</sup>

Babai explains little further regarding the origin of both natures in the divine and the human natures found in Christ.

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1. *Khudra*, Vol. 1, p. 118 (Syriac numeral).

Unfortunately *Khudra* does not state who is the author of this anthem. But *Kdam Wather* says so. It is in an unnumbered page between pages 175 and 176 (Pages 175 and 176 are repeated by mistake). *Kdam Wather*, Trichur: Mar Narsai Press, 1940.

One is the Messiah, adored by all in two Natures,<sup>2</sup> who as touching His godhead, is begotten of the Father, without beginning, and before all ages; and, as touching His Manhood, was born of Mary, in the fulfilment of time, as body of union. His Godhead is not from the nature of His mother and His manhood is not from the nature of His Father, but the natures and *Qnoma* subsist in the one *parsopa* of this one Filiation...<sup>3</sup>

In the final stanza of this anthem Mar Babai confesses the inseparable divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, thereby denying any doubt of the dual personality of Christ, the heresy with which the Nestorians were condemned. Babai concludes as follows:

Therefore, O Lord we worship Thy Divinity and Thy Humanity without dividing them; for the power of the Father, the son and the Holy Ghost, is one, the sovereignty is one, the will is one, and the glory is one.<sup>4</sup>

A passage in *Gezza* to be read for Holy Nativity speaks of the two distinct human and divine

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2. The Syriac word used for Natures is *Kiana* in singular and *Kiane* in plural.

3. *Khudra*, Vol. I, p. 118. (Syriac numeral)

4. *Ibid*

natures found in Jesus Christ. The Anthem can be interpreted to show dual personality attributed to the Nestorian Christ. Nevertheless the contents of this anthem points to us the very fact of both the divine and the human actions performed by Jesus Christ during his life time.

The clear truth was manifest by the son of God to His affianced Church, when it pleased Him, in His love, and came into the world. He taught and preached the doctrine of His Divinity and  
 Humanity.

He was in the bosom of His Father before the  
 worlds,  
 from everlasting, He being truly God. He came to us in the fulfilment of time, took our body upon Him, and therewith redeemed us, He being truly  
 man.

He gave the power of walking to the lame, and members to the maimed, He being truly God. He slept on board the ship, He being man. He calmed the sea, He being God. He ascended the mount, He being Man.

The children praised Him, He being God. The Pharisees envied Him, He being Man. He wrought miracles, He being God. The priests conspired against Him, He being Man.

He rent the Temple, He being God. He cried out from the cross, He being Man. He cast darkness over the sun, He being God. He submitted to death, His body was embalmed and laid in a sepulchre hewn out of the rock, He being truly Man. <sup>1</sup>

Hence Mar Babai is emphasizing the two distinct nature of Christ. He is showing the obvious parallels from the life of Christ. Similar parallels are difficult to be found in the prayers of the West Syrian Church. However, there are several prayers for Christmas and Holy week which contain the ideas of human birth and suffering of our Lord. Commenting on this fact V. C. Samuel observes "obviously, there is no reduction of the manhood of Christ either in the Patristic or in the Liturgical tradition of the Syrian Church." <sup>2</sup>

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1. *Khudra*, Vol. I, pp. 562-5, (Syriac numeral). The name of the author is not given in the *Khudra*. Cf Bedger, *op. cit.*, Vol II, p. 35. John Mason Neale gives an editorial note here "The following anthem is clearly derived in great measure, from the letter of S. Leo to S. Flavian, a curious instance of the adoption of the words of a Catholic Doctor by the Nestorians after their fall into heresy", Badger, *op. cit.*, Vol. II. p. 424.
  2. V. C. Samuel, "The Manhood of Jesus Christ in the Tradition of the Syrian Orthodox Church." *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, Fall 1968, p. 162.

## XIII

### BISHOP ALOPEN (7th Century)

Among the foreign missionaries of the Church of the East, Alopen has the foremost place. It was he who took the gospel to China for the first time.

Practically nothing is known of his early life. He comes to our knowledge only with his mission to China in 635 A. D. He was probably an Assyrian. Perhaps he was a Bishop. His name Alopen may be the Chinese version of his real name which is not known to us. We know of him only through the writings on the famous Nestorian Stone erected in Sian Fu in 781 A.D.

From the above mentioned Chinese stone we understand that Alopen reached Changam in China in 635 A.D. The Emperor despatched his Minister, Duke Fang Hsuan-ling, with a guard of honour to the Western suburb to meet this distinguished visitor. Alopen was taken to the Palace. The Sutras (Scriptures) were translated in the imperial

library. The Emperor investigated "the way" in his own Forbidden Apartments and was satisfied with the correctness of this religion. He gave special orders for its propagation. In 638 A.D. the Emperor issued the Imperial Edict in favour of the Christian religion. Thus Alopen was able to preach and propagate Christianity in China.

There are four Nestorian documents which are called Bishop Alopen's documents. P. Y. Saeki describes them as follows.

1. *I-Shen-lun*, or Discourses on Monotheism, but which really consists of three different Nestorian *logidia* in Chinese, viz.,

1. *Yu-ti-erh* which literally means Parable, Part II.

2. *I-t ien-lun-ti-i* which literally means "Sastras on one Deva, Part I", but which we translated "Discourse on the oneness of the Ruler of the Universe."

3. *Shih-tsun-pn-shih-lun-ti-san*, which literally means "The Lokadjechthas' Discourse on Dana or Exhibition of Charity", but which we translated "The Lord of the Universe's Discourse on Alms-giving" and

(II) *Hsu-ting Mi-shih-so-ching* which has been translated as "Jesus-Messiah Sutra."

An excellent edition of all these four documents of Alopen was published by the Kyoto

Institute of the Oriental Cultural Academy with a very good and concise introduction by Prof. Haneda in 1931.

The fourth work mentioned above, that is Jesus-Messiah Sutra written by Alopen, is a very interesting document. Prof. P. Y. Saeki gives an English translation of those 206 sutras. Some of those sutras are reproduced below in order to give the readers some idea concerning the same.

1. At that time, preaching the laws of Hsupo (i. e., Jehovah) who is the Lord of Heaven, the Messiah spoke thus: P. 125-146.

(8) The Lord of Heaven incessantly going around all over the world, is constantly present everywhere.

(35) Why, then cannot any one see the wind when it leaves him? And what is the countenance of the wind like? Can it be red or green, or of any other colour?

(60) The foolish people, however, have come to make the images of camels, elephants, bulls, mules, horses, reindeer, deer, etc., with wood or clay.

(78) All the living beings should fear the Lord of Heaven and should correct themselves by repenting of the sins they have committed.

(150) The Lord of Heaven, therefore, made "the cool wind" (i.e., Holy Spirit) to enter a virgin named Moyen (i.e., Mary)

(160) And when *Ish Mi-Shih-he* (i. e., Jesus the Messiah) was born, all the people of the world saw bright signs in heaven and on earth.

(198) The Messiah gave up His body to those "wicked men" to be sacrificed for the sake of all mankind and made the whole world know that a human life is so very precarious as a candle light.

(205) Seeing these things, how can anyone gainsay that he does not believe what is taught in the sutras?

(206) Those who live or die only for the sake of the Messiah, are faithful believers, and consequently.....<sup>1</sup>

### THE NESTORIAN STONE IN CHINA

The monument is ten feet high; its weight is two tons. The material is a black, sub granular colitic limestone (with small  $3\frac{1}{2}$  feet width and a little under a foot thick. It was hewn out of the celebrated stone quarries of Fu-pinghsien. The figure head decoration of the Monument consists of an immense pearl between two creatures called Kumbhira. In the centre of the figure-head right under the Pearl is the apex of a triangle which forms a canopy over nine clearly carved large

1. Prof. Saeki remarks that the last words of this sentence is lost. He states that the Chinese "cut off the last few lines of the roll if that happened to be soiled or very much spoiled by wear and tear in order to make the remaining part look nice and tidy!" P. Y. Saeki *op. cit.*, p. 160.

Chinese characters arranged vertically in three lines which form "the titular heading" of the Stone. Their literal meaning is "the monument commemorating the propagation of Tachin Luminous Religion in the Middle Kingdom."<sup>2</sup> The cross on the monument resembles the Persian cross in Meilapore, Madras where St. Thomas was buried.

On the roof-shaped triangular form of the monument we find the most suggestive symbolic signs i. e., the cross, the cloud, the lotus flower and the branches of a tree or grass. Here is a combination of Buddhist and Christian symbols. A complete "rubbing" of this historic monument is preserved in the Metropolitan's Palace, Trichur.

2. P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, p. 113  
Tokyo: The Maruzen Company Ltd, Tokyo, 1957.

## XIV

### MAR ISHO-YAB III (d. 658 A. D.)

The most well known person who sat in the Patriarchal throne of the Church of the East in the seventh century was Mar Isho Yab (sometimes written as Yahbh) of Adiabene, who was the third one of that name to be the Patriarch.

According to Mar Thoma, Bishop of Marga, the blessed Mar Isho Yab was "the son of the good and honourable man of worthy memory, Bastomagh, the nobleman from Kuphlana, a city of Adiabene."<sup>1</sup> He was born around 580 A. D. and was educated in the schools of Nisibis and was a monk of the famous monastery of Beth Abhe before he became the bishop of Mosul (Nenevah) in 628 A. D. He later became the Metropolitan of Arbel and Mosul.

In 647 A. D. he was elected the Patriarch. About his administration the Bishop of Marga

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1. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, p. 124.

wrote that "he showed forth diligent zeal and care with all the solitude which it is right should be manifested by sons for the paternal inheritance of the house in which they were reared". Being a proud product of the monastery of Beth Abhe, he built a beautiful Church in that monastery. He decided to build a school also in the monastery and made all the necessary arrangements for the same.

To his great disappointment, however, Rabban Kamisho, the Head of the monastery, opposed this move. All the monks gathered in the presence of the Patriarch and requested him to build the school somewhere else and to allow the monks to live in peace. The Patriarch did not concede to this request, as he firmly believed that the school would add to the fame of the monastery. But when all the monks fled away from the monastery during the night, and the divine will was made known to him through a vision, the holy Patriarch changed his plan and built the school in his village called Kuphlana. At his request all the monks returned to their cells with peace of mind and satisfaction.

Mar Isho Yab III is mentioned in connection with two important episodes in the history of the Church of the East. The first one was the expulsion of Sahdona. An embassy of the bishops and theologians of the Church of the East was sent by the King of Persians to Emperor Heraclius. While

Isho Yab and his companions visited Apamea in Asia Minor they were invited to have a dialogue with an old man, whom the Bishop of Marga calls a "Sorcerer". When the Bishop refused to talk to this old man, Sahdona, who was on this embassy, went in, perhaps with the good intention of defeating the "Sorcerer" in the debate. Unfortunately Sahdona became a 'heretic' and began to write against Nestorius and his teachings. When Isho Yab became Patriarch, he expelled Sabdona, whom he considered to have fallen into the "heresy of the Greeks".

A second incident during his patriarchate made his name familiar to all the students of the history of Christianity in India. His unfortunate controversy with Mar Simon, Metropolitan of Rewardashir, is a positive evidence in favour of the relation of the Syrian Church in India to the Church of the East with its headquarters in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The dispute was concerning the appointment of Bishops to India, which was usually made by the Metropolitan of Rewardashir. The letters written by the Patriarch to the Metropolitan, Bishops of Persia, and to the monks and Church of Matar near Eabrem have come down to us as useful historical sources.

Mar Isho Yab III is best remembered in the Church of the East for his compilation of the prayer book known as the "*Khudra*". He wrote also

the services of baptism, absolution and consecration. Mar Isho Yab III wrote "many antiphons, epic poems, epistles, anthems and Consolations, in the most beautiful style, and also a controversial treatise against certain persons."

In conclusion, it should be stated that Mar Isho Yab ruled the Church of the East in one of the most difficult periods in the history. He had to face with the enmity of the Western and Greek churches who wanted to impose upon our Church the acceptance of the Councils of Ephesus (431 A.D.) and Chalcedon (451 A.D.). The so called Jacobites had spread from Syria to Persia and begun to act as rivals. The growth of the power of Islam was another threat. The controversy with the Metropolitan of Rewardashir, dispute with the monks of Beth Abhe etc., must have caused constant worry to him.

Nevertheless he succeeded in solving their problems and making a great literary contribution in the compilation of the '*Khudra*', and such other books. One reason for his success was that he was willing to amend his ways. When it was made known to him that his plan to build the school was causing hindrance to the monks he allowed God's will, and not his own desire to be done on earth as it was in heaven. In spite of the obstacles God used this son to be an evershining

star in the history of the holy Patriarchs of the Church of the East.

Isho Yab's 105 letters have survived. 52 letters belong to the period when he was the bishop of Nineveh. 32 letters were written when he was the Metropolitan of Arbil. The remaining two belong to the last period of his life when he was the Patriarch of the Church of the East. When we examine these letters, edited chronologically, we discover a large mine of information in relation to the history, faith, discipline etc., of the Church for a quarter of the Seventh century. There are some letters in which the historical accounts are difficult to be deciphered from the style of his language. About his letter No. 8, Bishop William Young remarks that Isho Yab "uses a highly ornate rhetorical style, full of similes and metaphors, and it is difficult to disentangle any facts from the flow of language in this letter."<sup>2</sup> The letter No. 15 talks about the reason for his running away from his diocese during the Byzantine invasions. Commenting on this letter Scott-Moncrief suggests:

This letter is intended by Ishu-Yab to form an apology to the Patriarch because of his flight from his diocese at the time when fierce war was raging between the Greeks and the Persians. The apology is verbose

2. William Young. *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, p. 86.

and full of vague explanations which, however, fail to convince the reader of anything except that the Bishop fled from his see just at the time when he was most needed.<sup>3</sup>

Bishop William Young thinks that Isho Yab ran away because he was a rich landowner. If he was captured by the advancing Byzantine army the ransom would be a huge amount. To escape it, therefore, he ran away to his estates in the hill-country.

While he was the bishop of Nineveh, Isho Yab accompanied the Patriarch and other prelates on an embassy to Constantinople. When they were returning they took rest in a church at Antioch during the time of famine.

While he was the Metropolitan of Arbil during the period 637 to 650 A. D. he had to expel Sadhona, Bishop of Ariwan in Beth Garmai. Sadhona was favouring Jacobite teachings.

Isho Yab tried to avoid an open conflict with Sadhona. But when the Bishop attempted to get the support of the secular authorities, Isho Yab expelled him from the Church of the East. Bishop William Young observes that the letter Isho Yab wrote to the people of Ariwan asking them to expel their Bishop is typical of the Isho Yab:

3. Scott-Moncrieff p. xlix. Quoted from William Young, p. 87.

He begins by apologising for his own stupidity in not recognising sooner that Sathona was incurable in his Jacobitism, and for trying to deal with him quietly and and privately, when he should have warned others that he was a heretic. He makes a remark about the state of the world, which suggests that he was an old man looking back on better days:

I was thinking, O my beloved brothers, that now the world has become worn out and very aged, and has already declined, now that the human understanding has also perished, and can no longer discover what is evil.<sup>4</sup>

The letter which Isho Yab wrote to his friend Izhak of Nisibis tells of his election to the Patriarchate of the Church of the East. Isho Yab was attracted by a marble casket of holy relic. He prayed God to protect him if he stole that casket. Thomas of Marga recounts that event.

Now while these holy men who have been mentioned above were passing through the city of Antioch, and while they were resting in one of the churches of this city in which they tarried many days, (p. 71) Mar Isho-Yahbh of Beth 'Abhe saw a white marble casket upon which was the sign of the

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4. Ibid, p. 89.

adorable Cross, and to this, united to the chariot of its honour, were two figures of cherubs. And he saw the mighty deeds which were wrought there by means of it, and he learned that there were inside it some of the bones and portions of the bodies of the blessed Apostles, and being hot with all the desire of his love for that casket in which these were laid, he offered up prayers to God, the Lord of all, and frequent entreaties, that by means of himself it might be brought to this country. And having vexed and tortured himself (by scheming) all manner of devices, and not knowing what to do, he gave this matter to God, (asking) that while he, that is Mar Isho-Yabh, used all human efforts, Christ would protect and defend him in a Divine manner. And this actually happened, for he stole it and brought it with him here with all the honour due to the holy pearls which were therein.<sup>5</sup>

We read about his concern for the human suffering in his letter No. 47. Isho Yab sent measures of barley to Nisibis to feed the people there:

Even in what has happened, in the feeble hope which the people of the Lord have placed upon a weak man like me, my soul

5. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, pp. 127-128.

faints with sorrow because the hope is so small, and I am troubled with the thought that the Lord's holy people have fallen from such a height to such a depth; but when I think on the ways and vicissitudes of Providence, then I acknowledge in memories of small things the grace of God overruling all this...Pray again for me that I may spend the rest of my days in a life that will please God. <sup>6</sup>

The relation of Isho-Yab as the Patriarch with the Muslim rulers was a cordial one as it is seen in the following account of Mari:

Isho-Yab of Huzzah...was appointed Patriarch of the Royal cities according to the rule. He was an exceedingly notable man, to whom the Rulers of the Districts greatly deferred, to such an extent that one of them gave him a diploma, in which a warning was given that no one was to make trouble for him in respect of his own monasteries, or see, or revenue, or household immunities-with only a small charge exacted for these things. They asked him each week what he needed: or he asked for whatever could be useful for the affairs of the Christians. <sup>7</sup>

6. *Ibid*, pp 89, 90.

7. Gismondi MAS, Mari p. 178a, tr. p. 55. Quoted from William G. Young, p. 90.

## XV

### MAR TIMOTHEUS I (d. 821 A. D.)

One of the well-known Patriarchs of the Church of the East is Mar Timotheus I. He was a passionate Christian, tireless worker, able leader, wise builder, devoted churchman, theologian, and the last, but not the least, a great missionary. His name is written in golden letters in the history of expansion of the Church of the East as well as in the history of the doctrines of our church.

He was born in 727 or 728 A.D. in Adiabene. His uncle was Mar Geevarghese, the Bishop of Beth Bagash. The boy was sent to the famous monastery of Beth Abe, where he got his theological training. It is written in the "Book of Governors" of Thomas of Marga that an old monk prophesied to this young man:

".....Guard thyself from all ignoble things, for thou shalt become Patriarch of all the country of the East. And behold, our Lord

will make thee triumphant so that like unto thee no one hath ever been, and before and after thee no one shall ever be. Forty and two years shalt thou stand at the head of all the pastures of Christ, and when by the hand of God thou hast been exalted to these things, let thy heart be disposed to honour this holy house....."<sup>1</sup>

He became a successor to his uncle as the Bishop of Bet Bagash before 770 A.D. Timothy's uncle Mar Geevarghese (George) resigned the bishopric on the grounds of his old age. He requested the Metropolitan Mar Maran-ammeh to appoint his nephew, the young man Timothy, as his successor. Timothy was a success as a Bishop. He became a friend of Musa Ibn Musab, the Governor of Mosul. The Governor exempted the diocese of Bet Bagash from taxes.

In 779 the Patriarch of the Church of the East Mar Khananishu died of poisoning. The bishop of Bet Bagash, Mar Timotheus aspired for the position of the Patriarch. But the synod of Bishops voted for Mar Isho Yabh the old bishop of Nineveh to be the patriarch. But Mar Timotheus informed Mar Isho Yabh that the position of a patriarch was too difficult for an old man to handle. He promised to make Isho Yabh the Metropolitan of Adiabene, as Metropolitan Mar Maran-ammeh had passed

1. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, p. 381.

away. He also promised monetary help to the bishops if they made him the Patriarch. He did not keep his promise regarding his money payments. Actually the bags he had showed them contained only copper money and not dinars as he claimed. Bishop Thomas of Marga justifies the methods Timothy used in order to get elected as the patriarch.

There are times when matters concerning heaven and things above (this) world require human means and help, and we may learn and prove from many instances that such means and help are allowed by the Will of God, even though they progress by cunning. When God the Lord of all made the blessed Isaac to bless his sons, he moved him with the desire for food of the chase in the desert, to such a degree that when Esau was away, there should be the opportunity for Jacob to carry away the blessing. And if it were not so, would not that great and rich man have said to his son, "My son, slay me a kind of the goats, that I may eat, and that my soul may bless thee before I die?" (p. 197) but no, he sent him off upon the troublesome labour of hunting after fleeing an inaccessible prey. Thus also was it when Samuel was commanded by the Lord to anoint David, and as he feared the sword of Saul, he was commanded

to take a heifer and to say, "I am come to sacrifice to the Lord." Thus also was it when the blessed Paul received a revelation from God that not one of them should perish, but only the ship, and he said beforehand to all those who were with him, "Eat bread, and be not distressed, for our Lord hath revealed it to me that no soul of us shall perish, but only the ship"; and (when) he knew that the sailors were making ready to flee, he said to the Romans who were with him. "If these flee we shall all perish." And (there are) many (other) instances which it is not necessary for us to collect.<sup>2</sup>

The chief opponents of Mar Timotheus in this election were Thoma, Metropolitan of Keshkar, Ephraim of Gunde-Shabhor, Soloman of al-Hadithah, Joseph of Merv and Sergius of Ma'alltha. Excommunications were issued. Joseph of Merv was not content with these useless verbal exercises. He brought his grievance before the Khalif of Bagdad, al-Mahdie, but to no avail. Finally this disappointed bishop became a Muslim. He was publicly convicted of sodomy.

Mar Timotheus is well known for his letters. He wrote two hundred letters. They were copied in two volumes during his life time. 59 complete

2. *Ibid*, pp. 382, 383.

letters have come down to us. Of these 39 letters were edited and printed with Latin translation by O. Braun. One has been edited and translated by B. J. Bidawid. Another has been edited and translated into English by A. Mingana. Therefore 17 letters are yet to be edited and translated. Bidawid, however, has given detailed summaries of these untranslated letters in French.

The Syriac manuscript of the letters of Mar Timotheus preserved in the Metropolitan's Palace in Trichur contains only 54 letters. The manuscript was copied in 1897 in 361 pages with another 85 pages containing the conversation between Mar Timotheus and Caliph Mahdi. Late Mar Thoma Darmo had edited and printed a major portion of these letters when he left India in 1968. Hence the printing of this Syriac book was never completed.

To get a glimpse of the style of the letters of this Patriarch letter 9 written in 783 or 785 A. D. is quoted below:

To Rabban Mar Sergius, priest and doctor,  
Timothy the pilgrim wishes peace in the  
Lord.

I have twice before written to your Chastity,  
and now this is my third letter. Stand fast  
on the hope we all hold, as on the rock of  
truth; lift your meditation and thoughts to  
the Supreme High Priest, the great Jesus

Christ; pray to Him without ceasing, that our sins and the sins of our community may be atoned for. Nothing is impossible for Him; without ceasing, therefore, please Him with the sweet sacrifices of chastity. Let all your actions and words be founded on Jesus Christ. "Whatsoever ye do, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17). "There is none other names among men, whereby we are bound to live" (cf. Acts 4:12). For God was made incarnate, and man was fixed and grounded in God, not like an accident in a substance, but like a subsistence in a subsistence.

In all things, be adorned with humility, for without that no one can come to God. It is the ladder that leads to heaven, the steps that lift us to God. Though lower than all, it alone is, and is deemed to be, higher than all. This and the like qualities are with you, and will not be liable with you but pray God that they may be, and be deemed to be, more fully in you.

Take care of all that concerns the scholars, whether boarders or day-scholars. Take special care of the Monasteries of Saliba, and Bait Abe, and the other convents. Take good care to copy out Dionysius as closely

as possible to the version of Athanasius and Phocas. Examine the letters I wrote to Mar Petion, of holy memory; borrow them from Elijah bar Farrukzad. Enquire what books of our Fathers there are in Bait Mar Mattai, and let me know about them. Enquire about rare books, as many as you can, and let me know about them.<sup>3</sup>

Even in this personal letter the patriarch uses the Scriptural quotations to support his statements. The patriarch's interest in the monasteries is evident in this letter as well as in other letters. A modern Protestant scholar remarks about the above mentioned letter "The letter, in brief, shows us Timothy's pastoral concern, his educated philosophical outlook, and his interest in books."<sup>4</sup> The same author goes on to make a general observation on the letters of Mar Timothy.

When Timothy is writing a theological or philosophical dissertation, or defending some Christian doctrine against heresy, he can be long-winded and rhetorical, but when he is giving a piece of news, or sending instructions about something, or asking about books, he is refreshingly brief and to the point, and shows that he possessed a healthy sense of humour.<sup>5</sup>

3. Letter of Timothy 9 (XVI) Braun, pp. 79-80 Quoted from William G. Young *Patriarch Shah and Caliph*, pp. 129-130.

4. William G. Young, p. 130.

5. *Ibid*

The letter he wrote to his friend Sergius, Metropolitan of Elam noted below regarding the misbehaviour of the Metropolitan of Sarbaz, gives us a historical evidence that, this patriarch was sending bishops to China and India. It also concludes with the pathetic predicament of a bishop who discovered that "episcopate is no good to me." Because of these reasons the letter 40 is given in detail, although very lengthy:

We ordained Hanan-ishu, about whom I have written to Your Grace, as Metropolitan of Sarbaz, and we told him to keep the matter a secret between the two of us. "Don't let anyone realise who you are", I told him, "till you arrive at the See for which you have been appointed." This had to be done because the Persians were cruel and ferocious. Before the ordination had even been carried out, however, he let out the secret in our Royal City; and so I made up my mind that seeing he could not keep a secret, I would never lay hands on him to impart the Holy Spirit. Then he ran to some friends and got their help; they pestered me with their entreaties; "Forget this stupidity of his", they said. "It was the result of impatience, not of malice." And when, after long efforts, they had persuaded me to go ahead with the ordination, I told him

not to wait even for an hour in the Royal City, or in Basra or Huballat, but to set off at once to the place he was sent to. "I need expenses", he said. "Many monks", I told him, "cross the sea to India and China with nothing more than a staff and a begging-bag. Get it into your head that you are just as well-off as they are: you are setting out across the sea with ample resources!"

He disobeyed my instructions, and for about two months he went round the Royal City, from house to house. After that, he went down to Basra and Huballat, but it never occurred to him that his entrance into a see that was not his own ought to be unobtrusive: on the contrary, he made his entrance with staff and mitre as though he was going into Sarbaz itself! He began to abuse and threaten the Persians, and to read out to all and sundry the notice of ex-communication, which I had written against the accursed Babai, and which he had been instructed to read after his arrival at Sarbaz; and he began to collect *zuze* for his expenses. In fact, he didn't consider it worth his while to do even one of the things I had told him! As a result, the wretched man aroused against himself the wrath both of

the Metropolitan of Basra and of the Persians who were in Huballat. The former was angry, because Hananishu had intruded into his See in episcopal state; the latter, because he was frightening them: "It won't be long now before I anathematise Babai, and all the Persians living in Huballat!"

He has, however, brought down on his own head a punishment fit for his stupidity. Things had started off like this, and all this had happened to him in Huballat, but he had not yet defrocked Babai. When at Sarbaz the wretched man roused a storm against himself from every side! Finally he wrote to me: "The episcopate is no good to me. I shall go back to my monastery."

Therefore, know and inform him that, by the Word of God, I have defrocked him, and prohibited him from exercising any ecclesiastical order he may hold—outside Sarbaaz. Send word by letters to all parts of Your Grace's province that I have prohibited him in this way. And if, deceived by Satan, he comes to the Royal City, I shall make him eat from a different kind of table than the one he had at Huballat! As far as that idiot is concerned that is how things stand. By the word of God, no one — whether I am

alive or dead — will get me to cancel this prohibition " 6

Mar Timotheus was a scholar who was interested in preserving the faith by the study of significant manuscripts. In his 43rd letter he refers to the discovery of the Hebrew Old Testament and other books near Jericho. The following is a section of that letter summarised by Bidawid.

He (Timothy) tells that he had learned from Jewish converts, ten years before, that people had discovered books near Jericho; among the books were the Old Testament in Hebrew and other texts not found in the Bible. He has written to Jibrail, and to Shubhalmaran, Bishop of Damascus, to enquire about it. Someone had also told him that there were more than two hundred Psalms of David. Timothy believes that the books had been composed by Jeremiah, Baruch, or some other of the prophets, and that they had hidden them in caves for fear of fire or theft. At the time of the exile, about 70 years latter, these writers were all dead, and Ezekiel was obliged to look for the books extant among the Jews. Timothy ardently desires to be informed about it.

He asks Sergius to send him the book of Eusebius of Caesarea on Origen, to look for

6 Quoted from William Young, pp. 130— 132.

the book "On the Soul" by the Patriarch Mar Aba, and the treatise of Mar Narsai; Mar Ephraim (Sergius's predecessor) had written that he had plenty of other works there.<sup>7</sup>

Commenting on this letter Bishop William Young records:

A letter like that, written when Timothy was close on 70 years of age, and when, as he says of himself, his body was dried up, his hands stiff, his eyes dim, gives us an intimate glimpse of the calibre of the man: a true scholar, with so enquiring a mind, open to new truth and anxious for new discoveries.<sup>8</sup>

Mar Timotheus was indeed a busy man. His residence in the capital city kept him involved in several occupations other than mere ecclesiastical administration or theological thinking. In one of his letters he writes:

As for me, I have hardly the time any longer to busy myself with questions of philosophy and theology. I am in the Capital City, exposed day and night to secular occupations. I haven't even an hour when I'm not in combat — wrestling, thinking things out, working, even writing books; pursued by

7. *Ibid*, pp. 132-133.

8. *Ibid*, p. 133.

strangers, by those within, yes, often even by the Christians themselves.<sup>9</sup>

In his relationship to his Muslim ruler the Patriarch expressed his loyalty to the Caliph. Once the Muslim ruler granted the Patriarch 84000 *zuze* for the Monastery of Mar Petion. The Patriarch followed the Caliph to war. He used the public transport system. The Patriarch wholeheartedly identified himself with his country. He looked upon the Muslim rulers as having been sent by God to punish the Persians who were sun-worshippers, as well as the "Byzantine" Christians whom he considered heretics.

He attacked heresy and defended the faith of our church against the Jacobites, Catholics, Masalians<sup>10</sup> and Henanians.<sup>11</sup> He wrote to the Maronites asking them to renounce the teachings of Cyril of Alexandria and to accept the teachings of Diodore, Theodore and Nestorius.

Mar Timotheus was a great administrator. He settled the questions of canon law and discipline.

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9. Timotheus, letter 31, ( XLII ) Bidawid p. 85 quoted from William Young *op. cit* , p. 133.
10. The Masalians are a sect which appeared in the East from 6th to 12th century. Their name means, "those who pray " They denied baptism and all sacraments, admitting only prayer as the means of obtaining grace. They rejected any kind of hierarchy claiming to be themselves wholly spirituals and perfect.
11. Henanians are the followers of Khenana of Adiabene who was the head of the School of Nisibis in the 6th century. They considered heretics, because of their faith in one *Qnuma* in Christ.

He is said to have settled an unpleasant question of divorce between Harun Al-Rashid and his wife Zubaidan. Whatever may be the merit of this case, this shows the wisdom with which the Patriarch solved many of the problems.

He was a great scholar too. There was nobody to compete with him in the knowledge of the Bible, theology and philosophy. He read Aristotle in a Syriac version and caused others of his works to be translated into Syriac and Arabic. Probably Thomas Aquinas owed his knowledge of Aristotle to Mar Timotheus, because it was through the Arabs that the Greek philosophy came to the West. One of the pieces of advice which he gave to a monk who became a bishop: "Take care of the schools with all your heart. Remember that the school is the mother and nurse of the sons of the Church."

The residence of the Patriarch was at Bagdad. It was his immediate predecessor Mar Khananishu II who moved the Patriarchal residence to the new capital, Bagdad, where it remained till the arrival of the Mongols in the 13th century. This change helped the Khaliphs, Al Mahdi and Harun-Al-Rashid. With Khaliph Al Mahdi, the great theologian had discussions on the faith; perhaps one of the first major Christian-Islam dialogues. This debate, though the Patriarch did not convert the Khalif, is a glowing tribute to the Patriarch as an excellent debator and profound theologian.

According to Mar Abdisho Metropolitan (d. 1318 A. D.), the writings of Mar Timotheus I are Books of the Stars, Disputation with Al-Mahdi,<sup>12</sup> On Church Matters. Synodal Canons, Two hundred letters collected in 2 Volumes, a Catechism and a Dissertation against heretics. It is stated that he died in May in the year 823 A.D. Slightly different dates are given, all between 820 A. D. and 823. Anyhow it is agreed by scholars that he ruled the church as the Patriarch for more than forty years.

Among his missionary expansions, the Turks, Tibetans etc., can be considered. A King of the Turks became Christian along with his subjects and requested Mar Timotheus to appoint a Metropolitan for his country, which was done. In a letter to Rabban Sargis, the Patriarch states that having consecrated one Metropolitan for the Turks he was about to do the same for Tibet. In another letter to the same person, the Patriarch states that many monks crossed the sea and went with only staff and scriptures to the Indians, and to the Chinese. The Patriarch had been in direct correspondence with many kings, some of whom became converts to Christianity.

May his zeal for missionary work, learning, and good administration be an example to each one of our generation, Amen.

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12. The debate between the Patriarch and the Khalifa are available in many languages including English and Malayalam. The Malayalam translation made by the Rev. M. P. Francis, is available at Mar Narsai Press, Trichur.

## XVI

# MAR ELIJAH, BISHOP OF MOKAN

Let us look at a different kind of bishop. He was an evangelist who preached in the streets. Modern society may not respect him. For he was not an educated man. But God can work wonders through ordinary illiterate people. There were not many like Mar Elijah in the history of the Church of the East.

Bishop Thomas of Marga in his famous monastic history the *Book of Governors* speaks highly of this humble servant of God. Mar Elijah was born in Marga in the 8th century. He did not receive much education. He became a monk. He spent his time in prayer and meditation. His only possession was his Bible in Syriac language. He lived in a hut of reeds surrounded by a simple hedge. He spent most of his time in a dark spot in his cell. He developed his own method of meditation. Every time Elijah repeated aloud a

verse of a psalm, he would say "Hallelujah! Glory be to thee, O God" in order to *concentrate* on the next verse that was coming. He did not want to read a great number of psalms as the other monks. But he *concentrated* and meditated upon the few psalms he read. Thomas of Marga records:<sup>1</sup>

It seemed a waste of time to him that others were saying the psalter of David twice in a day and in a night, while minds were building up, and hiding and judging, and condemning, and buying, and selling.

In his simplicity Elijah captured the attention of his fellow monks. The news about the practical piety of Elijah reached the Patriarch Timothy I. The missionary-minded patriarch found a potential bishop in this simple monk who shouts "Hallelujah! Glory be to Thee, O God" while reciting psalms. The patriarch wrote a letter to this simple monk to go down to the patriarchate to be appointed as the bishop of Mogan. The humble monk residing in a hut of reeds could not think of being consecrated a bishop in the big city of Bagdad. He replied that he should be consecrated in his own monastery. He insisted that it would be on the day of Pentecost if he was to receive the power of the Holy Spirit so necessary for this great

1. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, V. 9. pp 502-3.

responsibility. The Patriarch consented and commanded the Metropolitan of Hedayab to consecrate Elijah Bishop of Mokan on the day of Pentecost. After the consecration Mar Elijah went to Bagdad to meet the patriarch. Then he travelled to his diocese of Mokan which was on the plain of the lower Araxes, to the West of the Caspian.

Mar Elijah went to his diocese in the company of merchants. One may ask what happened to his golden chain and golden Cross, while he was travelling in a long journey. The answer is simple. He did not have a golden chain around his neck. The modern Christian may laugh at him when he knows that Mar Elijah was hanging around his neck a complete book of the Gospels in small size instead of a chain. He carried a brass cross. Whenever he needed to sing his psalms he dug his staff on the ground and placed his Book of the Gospels on the top of it and conducted his prayers.<sup>2</sup> During this journey he healed the broken hoof of the mule of a fellow traveller by applying "his oil and salt of wild thyme, making the sign of the cross over it."<sup>3</sup>

One should not form any impression that the Bishop of Mokan was not systematic and able in his administration, being a simple, uneducated monk. He took his episcopal administration

2. *Ibid*, V, 10, p. 506.

3. *Ibid*, p. 507.

seriously. Bishop Thomas of Marga describes the beginnings of Mar Elijah's administration in the city of Moka as follows:<sup>4</sup>

Now when by the hand of God his helper the Holy Mar Elijah arrived at that city of the heathen, and went into it, and saw that the name of God, the Lord of all, and confession of Him did not exist therein at all, but that all the people that were in it offered up worship to dumb trees and senseless stones, and that it was destitute even of the Arabs and Jews who confess One God, the creator of heaven and earth, he offered up prayer ceaselessly to Christ our Lord on their behalf, that He, Who according to the custom of His graciousness and long suffering had brought all nations to the worship of His Godhead, might by his means, as by the hand of the Apostles, give to those people a new heart and a new spirit, that they might despise the images and senseless forms which they worshipped, and be converted to the knowledge of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

It is not only prayer that he did, he started preaching, not inside the Church but in the streets. It is recorded that "during the whole day he went about in the streets and lanes of the whole city

<sup>4</sup>. *Ibid*, p. 508.

and preached to the inhabitants with a loud voice, .....”<sup>5</sup> What a strange bishop? A street preacher. A true follower of Jesus Christ who went round preaching and performing miracles.

He did not take rest at night after a day's hard labour of preaching in the streets. He spent his nights in prayer. Bishop of Marga records:

And having gone round and about the whole day in this preaching of Life, every evening he used to go forth outside the city, and fix the cross (upon his staff) and sing the service for the night and pray until dawn; and when it was morning, and they opened the gates, and (the people) came forth, and saw that he sat openly before the cross they marvelled and were astonished.<sup>6</sup>

Astonished they were because wolves used to roam outside the city wall where the Bishop was having his night vigil. The people had compassion on him and requested him to spend the night inside the city wall. But the monk Bishop used to reply “The God whom I serve will protect me from the wolves.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite his preaching in the day and vigil by night, he did not succeed in converting the minds of the people of Moka. “At one time they mocked at him and at another they laughed at him.”

5. *Ibid*, p. 509.

6. *Ibid*, p. 509.

7. *Ibid*.

But an epidemic spread in the town. When the people were about to die Mar Elijah promised to heal them provided they believed in God. They agreed. He healed them. They became convinced of the faith of Mar Elijah. Still they were afraid that their former God Yazd would destroy them if they deserted him. He was firm in his reply. "Where is this Yazd, the son of a whore, whom ye and your fathers have served?" Then they showed him a tree of great height which had great breadth in its girth and great density of foliage." He demanded an axe and it was given to him. He girded up his loins and rolled up the sleeves of his tunic and began to cut down the tree saying:<sup>8</sup>

"The Voice of the Lord moveth the hinds to calve, and uprooteth the trees of the forest" he lifted up his axe and brandished it against the tree. And he did it a second time, and a third time, the tree fell, and he newed down all its ancient strength and thickness with three strokes of the axe; and he smote and cut down also the rest of the branches which were round about it, and which those erring people called the "children of Yazd." And he lifted up his voice, and with his hand he made signs to those people to come down to him, and they did so, and they gathered together the reeds, and

8. *Ibid*, p. 512.

pieces of bramble and pieces of dry wood, and laid them on the tree and upon its branches, and burnt them up, and thus the error of that devil ceased.

As a result of this wonderful victory over the superstition of Yazd, the people returned to the city rejoicing. They built a glorious building for a Church and he baptized many people. He ordained many clergy and copied psalms for them to study.

While the Church was firmly established in the city of Mokan, Mar Elijah decided to return to his old monastery of Beth Abhe and to tell the other monks how God helped him in evangelising heathens in the city of Mokan.<sup>9</sup>

And when he had tarried with them for many years, the holy man was minded to come to this country to worship in the holy monastery of the house of his fathers, and to return. And when he had done this, and had come here, he shewed to all his brethren the conversion of those erring nations which, by his hands, had been converted to life and redemption, and how he had built for them a church, and how he had baptized and sanctified them, and (how) they had become participators (p. 286) in his joy in divine gratitude for these things.

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9. *Ibid*, pp. 513, 514.

It was at this time that Mar Jacob, bishop of Marga, visited this monastery with some well known Christians of his diocese. He requested this monk bishop to tour the neighbouring places before returning to the city of Mokan. Mar Jacob wrote to all the believers as follows:

Behold I have entreated the pious and holy Mar Elijah, Bishop of Mokan, the strenuous soldier of virtue and the doer of mighty deeds, to go forth and round about among all the villages which ye inhabit that ye may be blessed by his holiness. Now therefore any one of you who hath any (cause for) judgment, or who wisheth to receive the laying on of hands for grades of the Holy Church, hath the power to settle the idle matters of his contention before Mar Elijah and to receive ecclesiastical ordination.<sup>10</sup>

Thus Mar Elijah visited many places and healed the sick. This missionary tour was a great occasion for spiritual renewal of the Christians. Bishop Thomas of Marga wrote what he had heard from a venerable old man Sergius who accompanied Mar Elijah in this tour. This is what Sergius told:

I was one of those who accompanied him from the monastery, and when all the believing men heard (of him) they came out

10. *Ibid*, p. 514.

to meet us from a great distance, and they brought us into their churches with service and honour, and a great crowd accompanied us from one village to another; and he healed and made whole the sick and the afflicted, and cast out devils by the word of his mouth. And heathens and Jews came to be blessed by him; and by his means the (p. 287) praise of God increased in the mouth of the inhabitants of this country who saw the sick that were made whole, and the deaf and the dumb who heard and spake.<sup>11</sup>

This missionary tour was a tedious one. It was not a comfortable travel on the horse. Sergius, the companion of this journey, reports:

He never sat upon an ass during the whole (time) of our going round about through this country. Now he acted thus all his life, for he walked upon his feet at an easy pace, and a psalm was never absent from his mouth. And at the words "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to Holy Ghost" which (came) between each *mar-mitha*, he used to bow down and prostrate himself to the ground as a mark of honour, and he did not refrain from this even when he was (walking) upon stones, or briars or

11. *Ibid*, pp. 614, 515.

any other (thorny) growth, and at every place (in the psalm) where he ought to say the *Gloria*, he bowed down until he touched the ground with his head.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the fatigue of this missionary tour this evangelist Bishop of Mokan fell ill. God did not let him die in exile. He returned to his monastery of Beth Abhe, and "so departed from this temporary life to the enjoyment of everlasting life." The eye witness account of his death narrated by Mar Abraham the Catholicos is another example of the spiritual life of this monk bishop. Thomas of Marga records this account as follows:<sup>13</sup>

"While many of us were gathered together about him at the hour of his departure, he sat and spake with us concerning his separation from us. And he commanded us to say the response of baptism (which runs) 'The doors of the spiritual marriage chamber are opened for the absolution of men'" "while he sat with his hands laid upon his knees. And when we had come (to the passage) "Enter in then ye that are called to the joy which hath been prepared for you", he opened his mouth three times (to join in the singing) and his soul departed from his body with the joy which was

12. *Ibid*, pp. 315, 516.

13. *Ibid*, p. 518, 519, 520.

prepared for him. And marvelling we understood that he actually saw and beheld with the hidden eye of his mind the happiness which had been prepared for him, and that it was because of this he has asked us to sing this baptismal response, and that the rest and happiness which is laid up for the righteous baptized firstborn whose (names) are written down in heaven had assumed a visible form. And he was buried with great ceremony and honour by all the congregation of his sons and brethren, and he was laid with the rest of the Bishops and Metropolitans who were before him in the martyrrium of this monastery; and is made ready for him with those who are of like rank and garb the enjoyment of heaven, namely the just and righteous in whose footsteps he walked, and in whose manner of life he triumphed.

The correct dates of the evangelistic activities of the Bishop of Mogan are not known to us. It was most probably in the period 805 and 825 A.D. It was a time of intensive evangelistic activities of the Church of the East in China and other places. Mar Elijah became a pioneer to a country of the North East, near to the peoples of Dailam. By his life of simplicity and piety this Bishop of Mogan stands out as a pioneer and illustrious example for the members of the Church of the East.

## XVII

# ISHODAD OF MERV

Little is known of the early history of Ishodad of Merv who wrote commentaries on various books of the Bible. He was not known outside the Church of the East until the present century. When his commentaries on the gospel were published by the Cambridge University Press in 1911 with English translation made by the famous Syriac scholar Mrs. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, interest was evinced outside the limited circle of Syriac scholars to understand the comments which Ishodad made on the gospels.

Ishodad was born at a place called Merv in Assyria towards the end of the 8th or the beginning of the 9th century. He became the Bishop of Hedatha. His erudition and wisdom coupled with an attractive personality made himself known outside his diocese of Hedatha. In the middle of the 9th century the Church of the East lost their

able patriarch Abraham II of Marga. Search for a worthy successor was carried on for two years and in 852 A. D. all the faithful agreed to accept the nominee of Abraham bin Noah as Patriarch. Abraham nominated Ishodad, bishop of Hedatha to be the Patriarch.

Abraham bin Noah did not succeed to get the approval of the Caliph Mutawakkil. The Caliph's physician Bochteesho was a Christian. He persuaded Caliph Mutawakkil to appoint his friend Theodosius (or Theodorus) as the Patriarch. The Christian population rejoiced at the interest which the Muslim ruler was kind enough to show in their affairs.

Thus Ishodad lost the chance to become the Patriarch of the Church of the East. But considering the tragedy that fell on Patriarch Theodorus within a few years, Bishop Ishodad can be counted to be more fortunate than his rival. The Arian heretics informed Caliph Mutawakkil that the new Patriarch was conspiring with the Greeks against the Muslim ruler. The Caliph called the Patriarch to Bagdad and imprisoned him for three years. He dismissed Bochteesho, his physician. A severe persecution of the Christians followed.

Ishodad was not only a New Testament scholar but also an old Testament scholar. According to Assemani, the famous Syriac scholar, Ishodad wrote on the Pentateuch (five books of

Moses), Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, David, (When Syrians speak of David they mean the psalms), Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Canticles and Job. Syrians suppose that all these books of the Old Testament were translated from Hebrew into Syriac in the time of Solomon, at the request of his friend Hiram, king of Tyre.

It is his commentary on the four gospels that has been edited and published with English translation by Mrs. Margaret Gibson. This work gives us a clue to the erudition of 'Ishodad. Dr. Rendel Harris who was planning for an edition of this work entrusted this difficult task to Mrs. Gibson. In the introduction Dr. Rendel Harris wrote to the translation of Mrs. Gibson, he writes as follows:

In publishing the commentaries of the famous Nestorian father Isho'dad, and in accompanying the Syriac text with a translation into English, Mrs. Gibson has added greatly to the obligations under which the learned world has been laid by the devotion to sacred literature and the zealous pursuit of fresh material for its study shown by herself and her twin-sister, Mrs. Lewis.

I believe this is Mrs. Gibson's second excursion into the field of Syriac literature (the first being the publication of the Syriac Didascalia), and I am surprised at the courage (I had almost said daring) which she

has displayed in attacking a work so extended, and beset by so many internal difficulties, and if there should be found some places in which Mrs. Gibson has failed to grasp Ishodad's meaning, or has rendered the Syriac wrongly, a tolerant judgment will no doubt be given by scholars in view of the fact that so much has been added to Syriac literature at a single stroke.<sup>1</sup>

The commentary of Ishodad is valuable for the quotations it contains from earlier authors. Since some of those earlier works are lost, this book helps us to get a glimpse into the lost works of earlier fathers. Several quotations from the Diatessaron of Tatian have been preserved through the book of Ishodad. About the significance of this commentary Dr. Rendel Harris states:

Not only was Tatian quoted in several places, but the commentary of Ephrem upon the Diatessaron could be found lurking under the name of Ephrem, so that the pages of Ishodad became a gold-mine for the recovery of the original Syriac of Ephrem's Commentary, known until then only from an Armenian translation; and I was able in 1895 to publish a whole volume of these

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1. *The commentaries of Ishodad of Merv*, edited and translated by Margaret Dunlop Gibson, Vol I, Cambridge University Press, 1911, P XI.

imbedded fragments, under the title of Fragments of the Commentary of Ephrem Syrus upon the Diatessaron: the process of extraction was not exhaustive, there was some more still to be identified; and in Mrs. Gibson's pages, it will sometimes happen that an unidentified fragment of the Diatessaron commentary may be, here and there, lurking. Scholars will be on the look out for such, in view of the importance of Ephrem's work for the restoration of the text of Tatian; indeed all Ephrem's genuine commentaries have acquired fresh importance, since Prof. Burkitt showed that the supposed dependence of Ephrem upon the Peshitta was a fiction.<sup>2</sup>

Not only Mar Aprem, but also Theodore of Mopsuestia and others have found their due place in the commentary of Ishodad. Fathers who did not belong to the Church of the East have been quoted in the book. Thus in the commentary on Gospels, Ishodad has quoted Theodore of Mopsuestia, Khannana of Hedhaiyabh and Babhai the great who are known as the Nestorians. He also quotes from Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil, Hippolytus, Irenaeus, Eusebius, Julian, Origen, Severus and others. Of these writers, most frequently quoted are Aprem, Josephus and Theodore of Mopsuestia.

2. *Ibid*, p. xvi.

The name Ishodad is a peculiar one. The only one reference to this name before 9th century is found in the famous Nestorian stone of Sian Fu in China erected in 781. Among the Syriac names inscribed on that monument we come across the name Ishodad for the first name. Since this monument was erected in 781, it must be somebody other than Ishodad of Merv.

About the peculiarity of this name Dr. Rendel Harris quoted above makes a possible observation:

The name itself is, I suppose, an analogical formation of a type to which Nestorian Christianity was much addicted, and which prevails even at the present day amongst Persian mystics and Orthodox Arabs. The name Abd-isho for example, is formed on the model of the Assyrian Abed-nebo or the Hebrew Obadiah or the Arabic Abdullah. In all these cases one type persists or is imitated. In the case before us, we have one out of a group, like Hanan-Isho', Sab-risho', and the only difficulty lies in determining whether the suffix dad is a verb formation, of which we have not, in Syriac, the exact equivalent, or whether it is an abbreviation from some older form of a Divine name. If it is the latter, an assumption which I believe to be untenable, we should not be surprised at the existence of

the relic of a pagan name; the early Christian Church had its Bar-nebo, known to us as Bar-nabas, with an artificial translation as "Son of Consolation", and the early Syrian Church preserved the form Abed-nebo, more nearly than the Book of Daniel did with its Aded-nego. If the name Isho'dad contains a Pagan element, it should be an abbreviation of the Thunder-god Hadad, who is equated with the Babylonian Thundergod in the form Hadad-Rimmon.<sup>3</sup>

After discussing in detail the above scholar reaches a conclusion that his name means "Jesus has loved", or Jesus is (our) friend" or "Jesus has befriended". Payne Smith suggests that Isho-dad means "friend of the redeemer."

To give a sample of the commentary of Isho-dad the following paragraph from his commentary on Mathew, Chapter X, verse 38, is quoted:

This, that *whatsoever* taketh not up his cross, and followeth after Me is not worthy to be My disciple, that is to say, he who counts not himself to this world as one who is already crucified to it by means of his love, is of no use to My discipleship. The Cross is spoken of in three ways; one that if there happen reproaches and affli-

3. *Ibid*, p. xiii.

ctions and torments and murders for His sake he bears them; second, it is used of labours and sufferings and sweat and tears; etc., righteous and virtuous men; third, it is said of those spoliations and deprivations of the world, as a man already crucified can not carry away anything under his arm.<sup>4</sup>

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4. *Ibid*, p. 30.

## XVIII

# THOMAS, BISHOP OF MARGA

Among the fathers of the Church of the East, there are many saints and poets. Some are famous as theologians and others as great missionaries who brought the gospel into distant places. Monasteries supplied a good number of these famous fathers. We would not have heard about some of them, if Thomas, Bishop of Marga, had not written a history of the monasteries and monks. He may be described as the historian PAR EXCELLENCE of the monastic movement of our church.

Thomas was born in a village called Beth Sharonaye in the diocese of Salakh, under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan of Adiabene on the borders of Azarbaijan. His father's name was Jacob and his family name is unknown. It is probable that he was descended from a wealthy Persian family. His village was probably about 30 or 40 miles N. E. of Arbil and about 80 miles N. E. of Mosul, in Iraq.

Thomas joined the famous monastery of Beth Abhe, in 217 the year of the Hijra, i. e., A. D. 832. Since he tells us that he was only a youth at that time, we can assume that he was born in the ninth century. Neither the year of his birth nor the year of his death is recorded, but we know the dates of many monks whose history he records. He gives the exact date on which his book was completed. He writes "This book received ending and completion in the blessed month of Nisan, on the thirteenth day, on the fifth day of the week, on the eve of the sixth day of the fast which is called (the fast) of Lazarus,....."

About his early life Thomas, of Marga informs us something through his famous book *The Book of Governors*.

When I lived in the service of the monastery I used to pasture a few cattle which we had in the woods in the valley near the cemetery.<sup>1</sup>

Another is of his flight when Kurdish thieves attacked the monastery;

At that time when I was his contemporary thievish Kartaw Kurds came against us in great numbers, and they spoiled and seized all the monastery, and they went into all the cells, and took everything which they found...We had all taken refuge in flight.<sup>2</sup>

1. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, V, 17, p. 566.

2. *Ibid*, p. 563.

A third is of the eagerness with which he made enquiries about the past glories of the monastery:

I used to listen to the histories of certain of the holy men, and by reason of the fervour which burned in me I used to make enquiries concerning them, and to learn about each one of them from the old men who were found here.<sup>3</sup>

It was perhaps when he was a monk there, but more probably later, that he visited the caves where various confessors had taken refuge during persecution.

Once, when the sense of what was right urged me to go round about and pray in the caves where they had lived, I went into them with great reverence, and I understood the affliction and tribulation of their lives, to which the very places where they lived testify.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas served the Church of the East in various capacities. He acted as the secretary of Mar Abraham who was the Patriarch of the Church of the East. (837-850 A. D.) Mar Abraham was formerly the abbot of Beth Abhe. In 837 A. D. when Mar Abraham moved to Seleucia to occupy the patriarchal throne, he took Thomas with him.

3. Ibid I, 40. p. 266.

4. Ibid, I, p. 560.

A few years later Mar Abraham consecrated him as the Bishop of Marga.

Though he is usually referred to as the Bishop of Marga, he was not in that office for long. He was promoted as the Metropolitan of Beth Garmai, one of the most prominent Metropolitan sees of the Church of the East in those days. As a Metropolitan, he participated in the Patriarchal consecration of his brother Theodosius who was the Bishop of Al-Anbar, and later the Metropolitan of Gunde-Shabhor. Theodosius ruled the Church of the East as the Patriarch from 852 to 858 A. D. although unfortunately he had to spend three years (853-856 A. D.) in prison, due to an accusation brought against him before Khalif Muttawakil by Sergius the physician.

The most important work of Thomas is undoubtedly his monastic history called the "Book of Governors" which is also known as "Historia Monastica of Thomas of Marga." This book covers the history of the monks of Beth Abhe during the period 595-850 A. D. This was indeed a significant period of the monastery of Beth Abhe, for, at least one hundred of its members became Bishops, Metropolitans etc. Four or five of them became patriarchs.

The author was persuaded to write the history of this monastery and its members by many monks and particularly his friend Abdisho. As a diligent

student of history, he did careful research into the available documents and historic records which are no longer extant. Further he interviewed the aged men living in Marga and other places. As a result of his research, this dissertation was produced. In its final form it was not merely an account of Beth Abhe, but an exhaustive study and an authoritative history on the asceticism and monasticism of the Church of the East.

Perhaps, more than any external influence, he was persuaded to write this book by the personal admiration for the monastery of Beth Abhe, of which he was a member. He probably started the preparation for this book while he was a monk, and completed it while he was the Bishop of Marga and prior to his elevation to the rank of a Metropolitan.

Regarding the contents, the English translater of this book, E. A. T. Wallis Budge, the famous British Orientalist of the last century, writes:

He (Thomas) describes at some length the occasions upon which the Nestorian Church came into contact or conflict with the Persian King, and he casts some new light upon events of contemporary history. The dispersion of the monks from Mount Izla, the mission of the Nestorian Patriarch to Heraclius, the apostasy of Sahdona, the stagnation of the Nestorian Church in the

seventh century, the foundation of sixty schools and the introduction of church music in Marga, the conversion to christianity of the peoples on the eastern and the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, the missions of the Nestorian propaganda to southern Arabia, Persia and China, the decline of the Persian and the growth of the Arab power, etc., are set forth with much clearness.

Although it is said that he does not give exact dates always, whatever he has given helps us to construct a fairly accurate chronology. Thomas himself writes:

Now although the order of the narratives of our work is destroyed and they do not possess the chronological sequence which it was expected they should possess, nevertheless according to my own opinion and according to the historical tradition which I have received from my fathers, I have preserved the order of the times, and those who lived in them. And if one person should be placed a little too late, and another a little too early, this is not a matter for blame and reproach.....

The same is true of his geography too. He mentions some names which are unknown. He

does not give the details regarding the exact location of the towns and villages, mentioned in his work. But at the same time, in fairness to the author, we should admit that these villages may have been places of ecclesiastical importance at his time.

Thomas of Marga did not conceal the failures and imperfections of the Bishops or the Patriarchs. He has recorded an interesting episode how a Patriarch (Slibha Zkha 714-728) tried to steal the Golden Book of the Gospels. The young and strong monks stopped the Patriarch with stones and sticks, with outspread hands and closed fists. This is how Thomas of Marga describes it:

Now this man, according to what ecclesiastical histories write concerning him, was an avaricious and a haughty man. And when he heard of the golden book of the Gospels which our Mar Isho-Yabbh, the blessed in everything, had bequeathed to this our monastery, he came with all his insolent pride to take it and to carry it away with him to Medhinatha the Beth Armaye! And when he had come unto the monastery and this assembly had received him joyfully, even as they were wont to receive the other Patriarchs who had come for the worship and honour of the place, he demanded of Rabban Joseph, the head of the monastery,

that he should bring him that Book that he might rejoice in the sight of it. Now when he had done so, for he had no power to withhold it, and moreover, he did not comprehend what was in the heart of the Catholicus, he brought the Book from the Library and gave it into his hands. And when the Catholicus saw the splendour and beauty of the Book, which was ornamented with pure gold, and precious stones, he was devoured by desire, for it, and he took it and laid it in his wallet. Then the head of the monastery answered and said to him, "Thou are not acting rightly in taking our Book in this iniquitous manner." And the Catholicus said. "Ye solitaries have no need of this Book, therefore let the believers enjoy it; and straightway he commanded those that weræ with him (p. 103) to set out on their way quickly. Now when this had taken place, the board for summoning the congregation was struck, and those among the ascetics who were young and strong ran after the Catholicus and stopped him, even as David did Gulyadh (Goliath), and they prevailed against him with stones and sticks. And when they had come up wltth him they threw him off his mule, and they buffeted him with outspread hands and closed fists in an unseemly manner although

they had it in their power to take the Book (from him) without striking a blow. Now the abandonment (to this treatment) was wrought upon him by God because he coveted that which was not his own. And when the aged Elders heard what had been done to him by the novices, they gathered themselves together and went forth to appease the Catholicus, and they began to apologize for what had taken place without their knowledge and consent; and in this manner they pacified Selibha-Zekha, and he departed from them.<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, we must appreciate the service rendered by the Bishop of Marga. His book is indeed a valuable work and held in high esteem by those who had occasion to come across it. But, like many good books, this book also is out of print for long. It is also unknown to many even within the Church of the East, not to mention the outsiders.

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5. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, pp. 228, 229, 230.

## XIX

### HUNAIN b. ISHAQ

Hunain was born in 810 A.D. Some scholars refer to him as an Arab by birth. Others consider him a Syrian. But he was one of the so-called *ibad* i.e., servants of God, namely Arabs converted to Christianity. They belonged mainly to Tanukh tribe. They lived around *al-Hira*, the ancient capital of the Labmids. The people of this tribe were not considered to be very educated.

In his youth Hunain went to Bagdad to study medicine. Yuhanna b. Masawayh was a famous physician at Bagdad in the first half of the ninth century. Hunain began to attend the lectures of Yuhanna b. Masawayh. The new student from the illiterate tribe annoyed his famous professor by putting him too many questions. Yuhanna b. Masawayh advised his pupil to return to his native town and to earn his livelihood there by changing money. Hunain was ashamed and left the class

room weeping. On the day he was dismissed from the school they were studying the book "On medical sects" (*Kitab Firaqat-tilb*) written by Galen, the famous Greek physician of the second century. This was the challenge to him which provided incentive to translate the works of Galen later. It is quite possible that Hunain had some scholars around him in his literary enterprise.

Hunain was a physician by profession. Therefore he used his literary talents to translate the books on medicine from Greek into Arabic. He also wrote some of his own. We do not have complete list of his books in Syriac. Hunain translated the works of greek medical authority named Galen. Fr. Macomber writes about Hunain's translations:

Thus, with regard to Galen's work on the schools of medical thought, Hunain first translated it when he was a young man. As a mature man, he corrected his first translation for his son. Afterwards, however, when the number of Greek manuscripts that he had collected had increased, he was asked to improve his translation by his pupil and nephew, Hubais. To do this he first compared the Greek manuscripts with one another and drew up a single, correct Greek text. The Syriac translation was then compared with this new Greek manuscript and

was corrected accordingly. "Thus", he says, "I am accustomed to do with everything that I translate."<sup>3</sup>

It is to be noted that as far as the translations of Galen are concerned, it was done first into Syriac and then only into Arabic. In addition to the medical books of Galen, Hunain translated the pharmacological treatise and other works of Phylacjrius into Syriac. The *Materia Medica* of Dioscorides was translated by Hunain from Greek into Arabic. Probably he must have translated this into Syriac before he did the Arabic translation. There are many such books and the scholars are not sure about some of them.

Mar Abdisho Metropolitan lists only three Syriac works of Hunain. The first book called "Chapters of religion" has disappeared totally. Although no trace of that book is found it is supposed that was an ascetical work. The second and the third books of Hunain are a grammar and a dictionary.

The grammar book was called *Ktaba d-al nuqze* (Book of Points). The diacritical points indicated the meaning. It was a proof whether the word was past tense or present tense. There were Syriac grammar books prior to the time of Hunain. Still Hunain was the first grammarian,

3. *Ibid*, p. 568.

according to Patriarch Eliya I of Tirhan, "to concern himself with syntax, that is, with predicates, the protasis and the apodasis."<sup>1</sup>

This grammar book too has not survived in its entire form. Nevertheless it has survived in at least four citations by Eliya of Tirhan, Bar Hebraeus, Yohannan Bar Zobi and in a work attributed to David Bar Poulos.<sup>2</sup> Fr. Macomber points out that a related work *Ktaba da smahe damyaye aw keyt d - luqqate* (Book of similar Words or of Glosses) had better fortune. Because it was combined with a similar work of Hnanisho, by a later author, perhaps Yohannan Bar Zobi.

The dictionary mentioned by Abdisho of Nisibis is the *Lehksiqon*. It does not exist at present as a separate book. However, it has been incorporated into the Syriac dictionaries of Isho Bar-Ali and Hasan bar Bahlul. Probably Hunain's *lehksiqon* was the first real dictionary in Syriac. Fr. Macomber observes:

Bar 'Ali, in his dedicatory preface, after warmly praising the good order and erudition of Hunain's work, notes that he was also making use of a second work by a certain Iso' Marozaya, but that this was of a distinctly inferior quality and was not properly arranged in alphabetic order; it fell short,

1. William F. Macomber, Ephrem-Hunayn Festival, 1974, p. 563.

2. *Ibid*, pp. 562, 561.

therefore of being a true dictionary. Bar Bahlul, moreover, declares that all of the explanations of works in his dictionary for which no author is indicated derived from Hunain's *Lehksiqon*.

It is also possible that at least two surviving Syriac books were written by Hunain. One is a set of questions and answers on medicine according to Hunain b. Ishaq with the remarks (i.e. the additions) of Hubais. This book corresponds with the well known Arabic book of Hunain the *Kitah al-masa'il fi-t-till-l-muta allimin*. The second work is a philosophical treatise. *Elleta law (hy) d-mettol mana arba estokse it w-la yattiv w-la hassir*. (The reason why there are four elements and neither more or less).

A certain anonymous syriac work may possibly be Hunain's *Syrian Anatomy, Pathology and Therapeutics* that has lost its original title in the manuscripts. Another such work on pharmacology is the *Spar sammane ar'anaye* (Book of early medicines). *Melle asyuta* (words on Medicine) and *Melle mawtranyata d-pilasope* (Profitable sayings of the philosophers) owe their origin to Hunain.

The Church of the East can be proud of Hunain b. Ishaq. For he was a deacon of the church. Bagdad should be grateful to him. The

Syriac language is indebted to him. Fr. Macomber sums up the achievements of Hunain in the following words:

Hunain b. Ishaq not only made Syriac an apt vehicle for the accurate transmission of Greek thought and science to the entire world, but he also showed himself a remarkable pioneer in lexicography and grammar and in the scientific edition of texts. Baghdad may well consider him one of her greatest citizens.<sup>4</sup>

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4. *Ibid*, p. 559.

## XX

### RABBAN BAR SAUMA

In 1287, a Chinese monk named Bar Sauma, of the Uigur tribe from Cathay went to Armenia on his way to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He was sent by Arghun Khan on an embassy to Europe to rouse its rulers to common action against the attacks of Islam. The Khans attempted to make alliance with the Christians in the West in order to counter the rising strength of Islam. Moreover the Khans tolerated the Christians because some of the royal ladies were Nestorian Christians. The great Hulagu Khan had a Nestorian wife. Arghun Khan (1284-91) also had a Nestorian wife.

- Arghun Khan wanted to mobilise a general crusade against Mamluks of Egypt. For this crusade he needed the support of the Christians. He sent two prominent Christians on this great mission to enlist support of the Christian rulers of the West.

One of these two emissaries was made the Patriarch of the Church of the East by the name Mar Yabalaha. He is the only Chinese Patriarch of this Church or any other church. The other companion Rabban Bar Sauma<sup>1</sup> went to Constantinople and Rome. He delivered a letter from Arghun Khan to Philip the Fair, at Paris. This letter is in Uigur characters which is preserved in the *Archives Nationales* in Paris. This monk interviewed Edward I of England in Guyenne.

Kublai Khan sent Rabban Sauma and Marcos on their first embassy to the West from 1276 to 1281. They started from Khanbaliq in China and proceeded to Bagdad through Lan-Chou, Liang-Chou, Khan-Chou, Tun-huang, Shan Shan, Tre-chartschan, Yarkand, Samerkand, Bokhane, Merv, Nishapur, Kasechan, Sultaniya, Tabriz. The second journey of Rabban Bar Sauma after his companion Marcos became the Patriarch of Bagdad, commenced in 1287 and lasted for about an year. In this second journey Rabban Bar Sauma went to Paris through Constantinople and Avignon and returned through Lyon. The second mission was sent by Arghun Khan as Kublai Khan's rule came to an end in 1284.

In 1287 Rabban Sauma, a monk of the Church of the East, visited Rome, an incident of great

1. Syriac Words *Rabban* means monk, *Bar* means son, and *Sauma* means fasting.

significance to our study. One author calls the experience of this monk "a document of incomparable importance for the religious history of the Mongol empire and its relations with Western Christendom."<sup>2</sup>

The background of the visit was this: In 1273 the Mongol king, Abaga, had sent his envoys to the Council of Lyons, where they were present at the Act of Union between the Eastern and Western Churches on 6th July 1274. After three years he sent six envoys to England with apologies to Edward I for his failure to give adequate support to him when he was in Palestine. This was followed up by Argun, son of Abaga, who in 1286 sent the most important of all the Mongol embassies to the West.<sup>3</sup> This mission reached Rome in 1287 soon after the death of Honorius IV and stayed in Western Europe for about an year, visiting Philip IV of France and Edward I of England and the newly elected Pope Nicholas IV. This mission is more significant to us because of the ecclesiastical unity it exhibited.

Rabban Sauma, the leader of this embassy was a Chinese monk and the friend of the only Chinese Patriarch of the Church of the East.<sup>4</sup> As

2. Christopher Dawson; *The Mongol Mission*, London: Sheed and Ward, '55, p. xxix.

3. Details of this mission are seen in the biography of title "*The Monks of Kublai Khan*,"

4. Mar Yaballah III, became Patriarch in 1281. His former name was Markos. His history is also seen in "*The Monks of Kublai Khan*."

the Pope was dead, the Cardinals discussed matters of faith with this Chinese Christian. After reciting the Creed of Nicea, as it is used in the Church of the East, Sauma explained his christology as 'two natures, two *Qnome* and one person'.

There is no evidence to believe that the christology of Rabban Sauma was examined and approved by the Cardinals. As a matter of fact the purpose of the mission of Rabban Sauma was not a doctrinal one. He came as a political ambassador.

It is not sure whether Rabban Bar Sauma knew the language of the West. Being a Nestorian monk he possibly knew Syriac in addition to his mother tongue. He actually celebrated Holy Communion service in Rome in the presence of the Cardinals who were impressed by the similarity of the holy service of this foreigner with the Roman liturgy of the Cardinals.

When Rabban Sauma celebrated the Liturgy in the presence of the English king at Gascony, the king received communion from this Chinese Nestorian. More significant than this is the fact that Sauma was allowed to celebrate the East Syrian Liturgy in Rome. Moreover, he received communion from the Pope.<sup>5</sup> Adrian Fortescue remarks that this is the only time a Nestorian has ever

5. Nicholas IV (1288—1292)

received communion from the Pope. If the Christology of the Church of the East was defective, the Pope would not have allowed Sauma to receive communion. When the Liturgy of the Church of the East<sup>6</sup> was celebrated in the presence of the Pope and the Cardinals, they remarked: "The language is different, but the rite is the same." Fortescue, who is an Orthodox Roman Catholic, tries to explain this by saying "clearly they were no great scholars in liturgy."<sup>7</sup>

A. R. Vine, a Protestant, remarks: "During all these neither the Pope nor the Cardinals seem to have realised that Rabban Sauma was a heretic and a schismatic!"<sup>8</sup> This, then, is one of the most curious episodes of the later history of the Church of the East, and the Roman Catholic Church, although it is not, in any way, a standard of the Roman Catholic attitude towards the Church of the East.<sup>9</sup>

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6. The Liturgy of Addai and Mari.

7. A. Fortescue; *The Lesser Eastern Churches*, London: Catholic Truth Society, 1913, p. 99.

8. A. R. Vine, *The Nestorian Churches*, London: The Independent Press, 1937, p. 153.

9. It is too much to expect the present Pope to endorse the letter of his predecessor - Nicholas IV to the Nestorian Patriarch.

## XXI

### MAR ABDISHO (d. 1318 A. D.)

The famous canonist and theologian of the Assyrian Church, Mar Abdisho Metropolitan was a prolific writer, both in prose and in poetry. He became the bishop of Sigar and Beth Arabaye in 1285 and the Metropolitan of Suva (Nisibis) and Armenia in 1290; He held the post until his death in 1318. In English he is known as Ebed Jesus Sobensis or Abdisho, or Abdyeshu etc. The East Syrian pronunciation is Avdisho. The name means "Servant of Jesus".

He is well remembered among Syriac scholars for his poetic composition called 'Catalogue of Nestorian writers.' It was edited by Assemani and is found in the third part of his *Bibliotheca Orientalis*. An English translation is found in G. P. Badger's *Nestorians and their Rituals*. Vol. II. This catalogue gives the list of books written by various authors including himself. Out of the 15 works mentioned here, only four are extant. Two are canonical works and the other two are *Marganitha* and Paradise of Eden.

The scholarly work 'Paradise of Eden' is known among the Syrians as '*makamat*'. Because, An

Arab poet named Harriri had written a book by that name consisting of 50 beautiful rhymed poems. Abdisho decided to compete with Harriri and wrote his work in 50 sections. It was a grand success. Whether you begin at the beginning or at the end, it makes no difference. It is a marvelous display of words and poetic ability.

As a canonist he is unsurpassed. The Church of the East had various canons passed in several synods. But there was no codification of these canons. Therefore Mar Abdisho did a great service to our church by codifying the canon law. His collection of canon law is known in the West as *Nomo-Canon* and among the Assyrians as the "*Sunhados*" which means Synod. A french translation was made by J. B. Chabot. There is no English translation.

His main theological contributions are in the field of Christology. In the *Marganitha* translated as the 'Pearl' or 'Jewel', he concludes that the council of Chalcedon confesses true doctrine concerning Christ, i.e., two nature in Christ, both divine and human. According to him, the council of Chalcedon confessed one *Qnoma* in Christ, because in Greek there was no difference between the meaning of the word *Qnoma* and *Parsopa*. He argued that the Church of the East never departed from the faith of the Fathers.

As to the Easterns, however, because they never changed their faith, but kept it as they

received it from the apostles, they were unjustly styled 'Nestorians' since Nestorius was not their Patriarch neither did they understand his language; but when they heard that he taught the doctrine of the two natures.....Nestorius, then, followed them, and not they him, and that more especially in the matter of the appellation 'Mother of Christ'.<sup>1</sup>

Mar Abdisho says that we cannot excommunicate Nestorius, because it would be contrary to the sacred Scriptures and the holy Apostles. He illustrates the christology of our church quoting another father named Yokhannan Bar Pinkhaye who wrote the word Christ (*Mshikha*) in two ways, first with a mixture of red ink and black ink, and the second with red and black inks distinctively. For the first he writes: "Behold corruption: Behold confusion! is it red ink? It is not. Is it black ink? It is not." For the second he writes: "Now look at this, behold light. Is it black ink? It is, Is it red ink? It is."<sup>2</sup> The critics of Mar Abdisho may push this illustration further to blame him that he taught the separation of two natures. But the illustration is meant to show that the two natures are not confused to one nature, but distinct, though inseparable.

1. *Marganitha*, Part III, ch. IV, see also Badger. *Nestorians and their Rituals*, Vol. II, p. 400.

2. *Ibid*, Part III, ch. V.

Mar Abdisho may be called a good pamphleteer. He does not try to minimise differences. He defends his position refuting the arguments of the western churches. He concludes the Vth chapter of Part III, saying: "He who argues against this, is one who has estranged from all truth". With the same spirit he makes a strong attack on the title '*Theotokos*', often translated as 'Mother of God'. In Chapter VI of Part III he gives his third argument against *Theotokos* as follows:

If Mary is Mother of God:- About whom Mary gave birth to, St. Peter testified "You are the Messiah, the son, of Living God" (Matt. 16:16). But, as you contend it is not the Messiah whom Mary brought forth, and (it must be) His Father. Thus Messiah will be her son's son and not her son. She is the Mother of His Father. This being the case, where is the Mother of Christ.

In conclusion it can be stated that he is an erudite scholar. Non-Nestorians may disagree with his christological conclusions. But they cannot easily ignore him. Since he lived several centuries after the christological controversies of the fifth century, the non-Nestorian scholars did not take notice of him. Nor is he mentioned in the theological debates of today except, of course, within his own church of the East. When we explore further we understand that he deserves a greater place in the christological debates of the twentieth century christendom.

# EPILOGUE

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We have seen twenty prominent fathers of the Church of the East. The title the "*Assyrian Fathers*" would have been appropriate if it did not include the three Greek fathers namely Diodore, Theodore and Nestorius. Since these three were indispensable to our understanding of the Church of the East, the title was put as the *Nestorian Fathers*.

This book would have been much larger than this if the theological position and the history of the Nestorian controversy were discussed. But it is omitted here hoping to treat that important subject in another forthcoming publication. Similarly a summary of the dialogue of Patriarch Timothy I with Caliph Al Mahdi was included in the draft, as it is a very interesting discussion. It is one of the earliest Christian-Islam dialogues. But it was omitted during printing just because the chapter on Patriarch Timothy I was already long compared to other personalities discussed in this book. Moreover, this book is meant as a collection of brief biographical sketches of the fathers.

Only the fathers from the fourth to the fourteenth century are discussed in this book. The fathers of the church before the council of Nicea (325 A D.) are the common heritage. Their history is available in other books. But the distinctive East Syrian fathers from the fourth century are usually omitted in other works. Therefore they have found a place in this book.

With the fourteenth century, there is a decline in the Church of the East in general. Therefore we do not come across any outstanding scholar or saint since that period. This is something to be deplored.

If the reading of this small book challenges anybody to make up for this deficiency, the writer of this work will be satisfied. There are many brilliant men and women in our church today. But they do not learn church history or theology. They learn mathematics, science, history etc.

Even in the period covered in this book, i. e. fourth to the fourteenth century there are some more prominent scholars and saints to be studied. The present writer shall leave it for others to study and write on them. These fathers are rarely known. Mar Augin, Mar Yonan, Mar Bishou, Mar Zaya, Mar BarSauma, Gabriel Qatraya, Isaac of Nineveh, Abraham bar Lipheh, George of Arbel, Yokhannan bar Zobi, Geevarghese Warda, Patriarch Elija III (Abuhalim), and Patriarch Timothy II are some of those who should be treated. If nobody attempts to write on them, the present writer may venture into it at a later stage.

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#### About the Author

Mar Aprem (formerly George Mookan) was born at Trichur on June 3, 1940. Educated in India and abroad he chose Church History as his field for specialisation and research. He is now one of the two Vice-Presidents of the Church History Association of India.

Ordained a deacon on June 25, 1961 he became a priest on the day he completed twenty five years of age. He was consecrated bishop on September 21, 1968 by Mar Thoma Darmo on his birthday and a Metropolitan eight days later at Bagdad.

He has written several books and articles in various publications concerning the history, faith and worship of the ancient Church of the East. Recently he has completed *An Introduction to the history of the Eastern Churches* in his mother tongue Malayalam, which is being published by the Theological Literature Committee of Kerala. Since October 1968 he is working as the head of the Chaldean Syrian Church of the East with its headquarters at Trichur.