

The Catholicate of the East

Dr. Paulos Gregorios

The title and rank of Catholicos developed outside the Roman Empire, and is much more ancient than the title of Patriarch in the Christian Church. The title and rank of Patriarch developed first in the Roman Empire around the 4th and 5th centuries, and was later copied by others. There were three Catholicates in the early centuries before the title Patriarch became recognized in the 5th century: The Catholicos of the East, The Catholicos of Armenia and the Catholicos of Georgia.

The Catholicos of the East, first called The Great Metropolitan of The East, resided in Seleucia-ctesiphon. Ancient chroniclers list the following as their Catholicos before the Council of Nicea:

1. St. Thomas the Apostle
2. Addai, the Apostle (Thaddeus, one of the Seventy?)
3. St. Haggai
4. St. Mari
5. Abresu
6. Abraham I
7. James I
8. Ahadabuhi
9. Shahlupa
10. Baba

This was by far the largest church outside the Roman Empire, though there were several such churches of considerable size, not only in India, but also in Nubia, Armenia, Iberia (Georgia) and later in Ethiopia.

The church of Seleucia-ctesiphon was apostolic in origin, and whether the preaching was done by St. Thomas, one of the Twelve, or by St. Addai one of the seventy, the apostolic origin and dignity of the See of the Catholicate of the East has never been in question and was recognised at Nicea.

These early evangelists, i.e. St. Thomas, St. Addai, St. Mari and St. Haggai evangelized Persia, Mesopotamia, Media, Assyria, Parthia Kurdistan, Babylon and other parts of west and Central Asia. The organisation and consolidation of these churches took time, and the credit for putting them together as a sort of a federation of several national churches Co-ordinated by a Catholicos (the word means “general bishop”) should go to Catholicos Baba, a process which began towards the end of the 3rd century, Ca. 282 A.D. and continued into the first years of the next century.

When in 399 Roman Emperor Arcadius sent the Mesopotamian Physician and Bishop, Maruta of Maipherqat as his personal envoy to the enthronement of Persian Emperor Yazdegerd, the Persian government began to give more respect to the Christian church which it had previously persecuted. Bishop Maruta came back in 409-410 to help with the reorganisation of the Persian church. A great Synod of 40 bishops was convoked on February 1st, 410, and the faith of Nicea was accepted by the Synod of the Persian church. The quarrels among the various Metropolitans were settled. The Metropolitan of Seleucia-ctesiphon was acknowledged as “the Great Metropolitan and Chief of All Bishops.”

The jurisdiction of the Catholicos of the East was also settled at this Synod of Seleucia-ctesiphon. Since we have the minutes of this Synod in the *Chronicle of Swet*, the full extent of that jurisdiction is now clearly known. Under the Catholicos there were six Metropolitans, Beit-Lap (with four diocesan bishops, under him), Nisibis (with five diocesan bishops), Arbiles (six). Karka of Bet-slok (five), Fars (Perside) and Qatar (Bahrein and that region of the coast), and several other bishops in Media and other outlying areas. We do not hear at this time of any jurisdiction over the Indian church.

The Chalcedonian controversies had penetrated the Persian church. The Synod of Beth Lapat (484 A.D.) was the first stage in this controversy, when Metropolitan Barsauma of Nisibis called together a few bishops (after Catholicos Babowi had been killed by the state as the charge of corresponding with the Byzantine Emperor), and declared the Persian church to be Nestorian. Acacius became Catholicos in 485 A.D., who was more moderate than Bar Sauma, but continued a basically Nestorian theology. In 498, the then Catholicos Babowi assumed the title “Patriarch of The East” (sometimes also “Patriarch of Babylon”).

The Nestorianism of this new Patriarchate of the East was certainly a mild one. As Patriarch Mar Babai (the great) put it,

“One is Christ, the Son of God, worshipped by all in two natures. In his Godhead begotten of the Father without beginning before all time; in his manhood born of Mary, in the fullness of time, in a united body. Neither his Godhead was of the nature of the mother, nor his manhood of the nature of the Father. The natures are preserved in their Qnume, in one person, of one sonship.”

The doctrine often ascribed to Nestorius - namely two persons and two sons - is not here. Babai's “Nestorianism” can be understood in an Orthodox manner.

During the period following Babai's reign, the theological school of Nisibis flourished, and it was during that period that “Nestorian” missionaries began coming to India and teaching their doctrines here.

Meanwhile those who opposed Chalcedon were not idle. The teachings of Severus of Antioch (Ca. 465-538) had also begun to penetrate the Persian church. Many in the Persian church were restive about the incipient Nestorianism of that church, however mild it may have been. With the renaissance of the pre-Chalcedonian church under Jacob Baradeus (Ca. 500-578), the west Syrian tradition, emphasizing the “one united nature” Christology spreads widely in the Persian empire. The strong centres of resistance to Nestorianism were in the monasteries like the convent of Bar Sauma (established 5th century), Mar Matta (latter part of 4th century), and Mar Behmam (late 4th century), soon took up the cause of ante-Chalcedonianism, which for them meant the same as anti-Nestorianism.

The Arab conquest of Syria and the Middle East took place around A.D. 640. The Pax Arabica allowed the west Syrian or anti-Chalcedonian church to function legally-since the Arabs were unwilling to persecute any one group of Christians as heretics. For them all were the “people of the Book,” and so long as the Christians their two taxes, the *Kharay* (land tax) and the *Jizyah* (head tax), they were all alike for the Arabs.

Thus in the seventh century there came to be three different Catholicates in the Persian Empire - one the original Persian church, a second started by the Byzantine or Chalcedonian Patriarch of Antioch with Byzantine imperial support, and the third the Maphrianate of the anti-Chalcedonians. Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia are now one caliphate. West Syrians were now free to come and reinforce the church in Persia. Thus Mar Marutha a native Persian, trained in a Syrian monastery was free to move to Mar Matta in Moral. Marutha became the first “Maphriana of The East” in 629 and ruled for 20 years. Under his leadership the west Syrian church began spreading in the areas where Nestorianism had previously a monopoly (The Byzantine Catholicate was privilege-ridden and lazy and never flourished at all). This Church (later to be called ‘Jacobite’ by the Greeks, after Jacob Baradeus) assimilated the wisdom of the Greeks - in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and other such subjects as well as theology. It produced great scholars like Severus Scbokht (+667) and Jacob of Edessa (633 - 708), the great grammarian-philologist, philosopher and exegete, the redactor of the currently used Syriac liturgy of St. James. This was also the Church which produced Gregor, Bar Hebreus (1226-1286) and Michael the Syrian (1126-1199), both of whom outstanding historians, as well as Dionysius Bar Slibi and Moshe Bar Kepha (833-903).

It is interesting to note that their west Syrian Catholicos (or Maphriana) of the East, had no jurisdiction at all over the Indian Christians. It was the Persian or East Syrian or “Nestorian” Catholicos that extended his jurisdiction to India during the seventh and eighth centuries. The West Syrian or “Jacobite” Maphriana did not seek to establish missionary colonies in India during these centuries. The reasons for this are yet to be investigated. By the thirteenth century this Jacobite Church under Arab rule, had twelve Metropolitanates with over a hundred Bishops spread over Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Arabia, but had no jurisdiction whatsoever in the Indian Church.

The Maphriana (Catholicos) of Takrit ruled over eighteen episcopal dioceses in lower Mesopotamia and further east, but over none at all in India, as is clear from all the records. By the thirteenth century the ‘Jacobite’ Catholicate began to decline. The Mangolian invasions of that century saw the Church flourishing at first, even converting some of the conquering Kings like the Mongol Prince Hulagu. The advent of Timur (Tamurlane) in 1394 saw the devastation of these ‘Jacobite’ communities. The Catholicate (Maphriana) fell vacant. It was restored again in 1404. But the decline was shady. By massacre, emigration and mass conversions to Islam. their numbers dwindled to less than 200,000 in the 19th century, and have been

steadily decreasing ever since. The great monasteries were pillaged, and their invaluable treasures of documents put to the flames or otherwise vandalized.

The eightyfirst Maphriana or Catholicos, Behnam IV, died in 1895, and the west Syrian Catholicate in Persia came to an end with him until it was revived 17 years later in India.

The “Nestorian” Catholicate, which was invariably known as the Patriarchate of the East, or as the Patriarch of Babylon, underwent a history much similar to that of the “Jacobite” Catholicate, except that it was transplanted to America by the “Boy Patriarch” Mar Shimeon in 1940.