

An Early Christian Reaction to Islam



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An Early Christian Reaction to Islam

Išū'yahb III and the Muslim Arabs

Iskandar Bcheiry

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Rafi al-Taweel.

ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviations of the journals that were used in this work are from Sebastian P. Brock, *Syriac Studies. A Classified Bibliography (1960–1990)* (Kaslik: *PdO*, 1996), 17–22.

<i>AB</i>	Analecta Bollandiana (Bruxelles)
<i>BJRL</i>	Bulletin of the John Rylands Library (Manchester)
<i>BSOS</i>	Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies
<i>BSOAS</i>	The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
<i>CSCO</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (Leuven)
<i>EP (F)</i>	Encyclopédie de l’Islam (Leiden and Paris)
<i>EP (F)</i>	The Encyclopaedia of Islam, new Edition/Encyclopédie de l’Islam (Leiden)
<i>EIr</i>	Encyclopaedia Iranica (London and New York)
<i>JAAS</i>	The Journal of Asian and African Studies (United Kingdom)
<i>JRS</i>	Journal of Roman Studies (London, United Kingdom)
<i>JESHO</i>	Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient (Leiden)
<i>OCA</i>	Orientalia Cristiana Analecta (Rome)
<i>OCP</i>	Orientalia Cristiana Periodica (Rome)
<i>PdO</i>	Parole de l’Orient (Kaslik, Lebanon)
<i>Pers.</i>	Persica (Leiden)
<i>PIO</i>	Pontificium Institutum Orientalium (Rome)
<i>PO</i>	Patrologia Orientalis (Turnhout)

Subs. Subsidia (in *CSCO*)

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INTRODUCTION.
PATRIARCH IŠŪ‘YAHB III’S VIEW OF THE
MUSLIM ARABS

The year 652 marked a fundamental political change in the Middle East and the surrounding region. On this date the Sasanid Empire collapsed and the major part of the Byzantine dominion in the East was lost to the hands of Muslim Arabs. The conquests of the Arabs were followed by deep cultural, social and religious changes that affected the life of the populations in the seized territories. An important, contemporary source describing the state of the Christian Church at this time is found in the correspondence of the patriarch of the Church of the East, Išū‘yahb III (649–659), which he wrote between 628 and 658. This book discusses Išū‘yahb’s view of and attitudes toward the Muslim Arabs. Although his view of the Muslim Arabs has been a subject of discussion by many scholars, there are still questions to be clarified, especially with regard to the chronological development of his views, the issue of the dating of his letters and their chronological arrangement, as well as the identification of literary sources that he relied upon in his portrayal of the Muslim Arabs.

IŠŪ‘YAHB III (649–659)

Among the great fathers of the Church of the East is Patriarch Išū‘yahb III (649–659), who was born around 590 to the Persian

Christian nobleman named Bastomag.¹ Bastomag entered his son Iṣū'yahb as a novice in the Monastery of Beth 'Abē. It was a famous monastery that belonged to the Nestorian monastic circle, where each monk lived in a separate shelter but acknowledged the rule of an abbot and worshiped with his fellow-monks in a common chapel. Iṣū'yahb progressed so rapidly that at quite an early age he was appointed bishop of Nineveh.² This happened in 628/629 and he took part in an important embassy to Emperor Heraclius in Syria under his namesake, Patriarch Iṣū'yahb II (628–646). Around the year 640 he was appointed metropolitan for Ḥidyāb.³ After the death of Patriarch Maremmeh (646–649), Iṣū'yahb III was appointed catholicos of the Church of the East. He died in 659, after having ruled for approximately ten years.

POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS CHALLENGES

Iṣū'yahb III lived in a period marked by radical political and religious shifts. The first half of the seventh century was a difficult time for the Church of the East. The Sasanid Shah Khosrow II (595–628) forbade the Nestorians⁴ from electing a new patriarch after the death of

¹ About the life and deeds of Iṣū'yahb III, see Herman G.B. Teule, "Isho'yahb III of Adiabene," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History. Volume 1 (600–900)*, ed. David Richard Thomas and Barbara Roggema, 133–136, History of Christian-Muslim Relations 11 (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2009); William G. Young, "The Church of the East in 650, Patriarch Isho'-Yab III and India," *Indian Church History Review* 2 (1968): 55–71; also, William G. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph: a Study of the Relationships of the Church of the East with the Sassanid Empire and the Early Caliphates up to 820 a.d., with Special Reference to Available Translated Syriac Sources*. Christian Study Centre Series, no. 8 (Rawalpindi, Pakistan: Christian Study Centre, 1974), 85–99.

² Nineveh is located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River in today's city of Mosul.

³ Ḥidyāb is modern-day Irbil in north Iraq.

⁴ The term "Nestorians" refers to the members of the Church of the East who followed a strict two-nature (and two-hyposteses) doctrine of Christ. This doctrine had been preached by Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople

Patriarch Gregory I (596–604), and the seat was vacant until the death of the Shah in 628. During this period, the Jacobites,⁵ the “denominational” rivals of the Nestorians, organized themselves in the Persian territory and established an ecclesiastical system extending the Jacobite activity from the Byzantine territories into Persian territories.⁶ Furthermore, after the collapse of the two major powers in the region (the Byzantines and the Persians), a new ruling power arose which came to dominate the major part of the Middle East. The Muslim Arabs defeated their adversaries and won a vast territory which contained a mosaic of populations, cultures, religions, sects, and languages.⁷ During the two previous centuries, different Christian groups had fought against each other by various means;⁸ however, during the second half of the seventh century the new Arab rulers brought about a new way of conceiving the God-human relationship. The religion of Islam appeared as the other face of the Arab conquest, and influenced the social, cultural, economic, and religious structure of Middle Eastern society. In addition to the challenge of

(428–431), who was condemned in the Council of Ephesus 431 and later exiled to Egypt where he died in 450. The Church of the East refused to condemn Nestorius and his teaching, therefore, it came to be known by its opponents as the Nestorian church and its members as Nestorians.

⁵ The non-Chalcedonian Christians in Syria and Mesopotamia who refused to accept the Christology of the Council of Chalcedon 451 were known as Jacobites because of Metropolitan Jacob Baradaeus (died 578), who organized the non-Chalcedonians in the middle of the sixth century after a period of decline. The Jacobites are also known as Miaphysites, and today as the Syriac Orthodox Church.

⁶ Iskandar Bcheiry, “The Birth of the Institution of the Mafrianate in the Syriac Orthodox Church in the first half of the Seventh Century” (in Italian), in *The Religious and Cultural Heritage of Western Syrians in the 6th–9th Centuries: Atti del 6 Incontro sull’Oriente Cristiano di Tradizione Siriana*, ed. Emidio Vergani (Milano: Centro Ambrosiano, 2012), 93–116.

⁷ For example, see Fred Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); also, Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (I. B. Tauris, 2009).

⁸ See W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

the Muslim Arabs, the seventh-century Nestorian Church suffered from the attempted secession of the Christians of Fars and East of Arabia, whose metropolitan at that time was Šem‘ūn of Riv-Ardashīr. The Nestorians in Fars had always been reluctant to submit to Seleucia-Ctesiphon in Iraq, where the catholicos resided. The Nestorian sources show that the Christian community in the Arabian Gulf area and Fars was regularly involved in ecclesiastical schisms and divisions led by the metropolitan of Fars. The nature of these issues is not clear, but probably had to do with questioning the authority of the catholicos as the head of the Church of the East.⁹ In order to contain the complex situation, Išū‘yahb III in his correspondence claimed the support of the miraculous deeds of the holy men (ascetics and monks) as part of his strategy to win the hearts and the minds of his people, and to negotiate a ground of collaboration with the new Arab power so as to preserve and build his church.¹⁰

IŠŪ‘YAHB’S LETTERS

One hundred and six of Išū‘yahb’s letters have come down to us in a beautiful Syriac manuscript from the tenth century (*Vat. Syr.* 157), preserved in the Vatican Library. The manuscript contains 123 folios, and it was brought from the East by the Maronite scholar Andrew Scandar for pope Innocent XIII (1721–1724). The letters are also found in several more recent manuscripts, including *Chaldean Patriarchate* 112 (1696), *Mardin* 78 (1868), *Leeds Syriac* 4.1 (1888), *Algosh* 172 (1894), *Baghdad Chaldean Monastery Syriac* 515 (1894), *Baghdad Chaldean Monastery Syriac* 516 (1901), *Baghdad Chaldean Monastery Syriac* 517 (1902), *Paris Syriac* 336 (1896), and *Vatican Syriac* 493 (1909).¹¹ These letters are valuable documents that inform us about the history of the Church of the East prior to the Islamic conquest and in the twenty years following this conquest (630–656). The letters are divided in *Vat. Syr.* 157 into three groups according to

⁹ See Young, “The Church of the East in 650,” 55–71. Also, his book *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 92–94.

¹⁰ Chapter three will examine this strategy in detail.

¹¹ Teule, “Isho‘yahb III of Adiabene.”

a chronological order that reflects the three stages of Iṣū'yahb's career. The first group of letters contains 52 letters (*Ep.* 1B-52B) written by Iṣū'yahb when he was bishop of Nineveh.¹² The second group contains 32 letters written by Iṣū'yahb when he became a metropolitan of Ḥidyāb (*Ep.* 1M-32M). The third group contains 22 letters written after his ascension to the patriarchal office¹³ (*Ep.* 1C- 22C). The letters reflect the personality of Iṣū'yahb as a pastor and a man involved in building a platform of collaboration between the church and the political government of his time.

EDITIONS AND TRANSLATION

Iṣū'yahb's letters were mentioned in the catalogue of 'Abdīšū' al-Ṣūbāwī in the thirteenth century.¹⁴ Assemani published some of Iṣū'yahb's letters in his *Bibliotheca Orientalis* in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ In 1894, Ernest Wallis A. Budge published some of Iṣū'yahb's

¹² Four leaves were lost from the beginning of the manuscript which belonged to the period when Iṣū'yahb was a bishop.

¹³ I am using the terms of "patriarch" and "catholicos" interchangeably, because in the Nestorian sources, often the head of the church and his office are mentioned as "patriarch" / "patriarchate" or "catholicos" / "catholicosate."

¹⁴ 'Abdīšū' al-Ṣūbāwī was a theologian, Syriac linguistic, and the Archbishop of Nisibis and Armenia of the Church of the East. He died in 1318. 'Abdīšū' al-Ṣūbāwī is considered one of the most famous East Syriac scholars in the history of the Syriac literature. 'Abdīšū' al-Ṣūbāwī composed several writings, among them an index of a number of famous Nestorian authors with lists of their compositions. This index was published by Abraham Ecchelensis., ed., *Catalogus Librorum Chaldaeorum, tam Ecclesiasticorum, quam Profanorum, Auctore Hebediesu Metropolita Sobensi* (Roma: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1653); Joseph Habbi, *Fibris al-Mu'allifin ta'lif li-'Abd Yašū' al-Ṣūbāwī* (Baghdād: Maṭba'at al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-'Irāqī, 1986). Regarding the life and the writings of 'Abdīšū' al-Ṣūbāwī see also A. Abuna, *Adāb al-Lughah al-Arāmiyyah*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: 1996), 404-410.

¹⁵ Joseph Simonius Assemani, ed., *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana, in qua Manuscriptos Codices Syriacos, Arabicos, Persicos, Turci-*

letters in his *The Book of Governors, Historia Monastica of Thomas bishop of Marga A.D. 840*.¹⁶ In 1904, P. Scott-Moncrieff edited the letters that were written by Išū'yahb when he was a bishop of Nineveh and provided a brief English summary of the letters in *The Book of Consolations, or the Pastoral Epistles of Mar Isho'-Yahbh of Kuphlana in Adiabene* (1904).¹⁷ In 1905, Rubens Duval edited with a Latin translation the complete collection of Išū'yahb's letters based on *Vat. Syr.* 157 and *Paris* 336 in *Isho'yhab Patriarchae, Liber Epistularum*, CSCO, Sy. II 60 (Paris: 1904–1905).¹⁸ Some extracts (and a few letters) from Išū'yahb's correspondence were translated into English by William G. Young,¹⁹ Robert Hoyland,²⁰ Mario Kozah²¹ and into German by Ovidiu Ioan.²² Išū'yahb's letters are written in Syriac of high quality, full of imaginative ways of describing spiritual, social, political, and religious situations. The letters are of varied length, ranging between one and six pages.

cos, Hebraicos, Samaritanos, Armenicos, Ethiopicos, Graecos, Aegyptiacos, Ibericos & Malabaricos (Roma: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719–1728).

¹⁶ Ernest Wallis A. Budge, *The Book of Governors, Historia Monastica of Thomas Bishop of Marga A.D. 840* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1894).

¹⁷ P. Scott-Moncrieff, *The Book of Consolations, or the Pastoral Epistles of Mar Isho'-Yahbh of Kuphlana in Adiabene* (London: Luzac, 1904).

¹⁸ Rubens Duval, *Isho'yhab Patriarchae, Liber Epistularum*, CSCO., Sy. II 60 (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1904–1905), 255–262.

¹⁹ Young, "The Church of the East in 650," 55–71. Also, his book *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 85–99.

²⁰ Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press, 1997), 174–182.

²¹ Mario Kozah, "Isho'yahb III of Adiabene's letters to the Qataris", in *An anthology of Syriac writers from Qatar in the seventh Century*, eds., M. Kozah, Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn, Saif Shaheen al-Murikhi, Haya al-Thani (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 39, 2015), 43–88.

²² Ovidiu Ioan, *Muslime und Araber bei Išō'yahb III. (649–659)*, Göttinger Orientforschungen, I. Reihe: Syriaca 37 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009).

IŠŪ'YAHB III AND THE MUSLIM ARABS: AN EVALUATION OF THE LITERATURE

The letters of Išū'yahb, especially his letters to the Nestorian local communities in Fars and East Arabia (*Ep.* 14C-21C), have attracted some scholarly attention in relation to the study of early Muslim-Christian relations, the origin of Islam, the early Arab Muslim conquests, and the reactions of the Christian community toward these conquests. These scholarly discussions have examined Išū'yahb's views of Islam from different points of view. In what follows, I will discuss some of these studies and their different approaches.

Rubens Duval, a French orientalist and specialist in Aramaic language and history, offered a great service to the scholarly world by editing the entire corpus Išū'yahb's letters with a Latin translation, based on two manuscripts, *Vatican 157* and *Paris 336*, in *Išo'yahb Patriarchae III Liber Epistularum* (1904–1905). In the introduction to his edition, Duval expressed his doubt that all the letters attributed to the time of Išū'yahb's bishopric would in fact date back to that time period: "Pars Prima scribendi arte valet, tamen nobis obscurior est, quia argumentum epistolae plerumque ignoramus."²³ Duval's doubt about the chronological arrangement of the letters attributed to Išū'yahb's bishopric became an issue that was taken up and built upon by later scholars, notably Jean Maurice Fiey.

Fiey, a French Dominican friar and prominent historian of the Syriac Churches, discussed the life and deeds of Išū'yahb III in a significant article: "Išo'yaw le Grand. Vie du Catholicos Nestorien Išo'yaw III d'Adiabène," (1969 and 1970).²⁴ In his article, Fiey takes into consideration Duval's suggestion that not all the letters attributed to the time of Išū'yahb's bishopric in manuscript Vat. Syr. 157 would actually date back to that time. Fiey asserted that the first ten letters of Išū'yahb (*Ep.* 1B-10B) were written when Išū'yahb was still

²³ Duval, *Išo'yahb Patriarchae, Liber Epistularum*, 3.

²⁴ Jean-Maurice Fiey, "Išo'yaw le Grand. Vie du Catholicos Nestorien Išo'yaw III d'Adiabène (580–659)," In *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 35 (1969): 305–333; 36 (1970): 5–46.

a monk in the Monastery of Beth ‘Abē.²⁵ The rest of the letters that were dated to the bishopric of Iṣū‘yahb were, according to Fiey, written before the Muslim Arab conquest of the Nineveh region. According to Fiey, Iṣū‘yahb’s correspondence from the time of his bishopric does not mention the Muslim Arabs. The few letters that clearly do mention them, such as the famous Letter 48B,²⁶ should be reassigned to the period of Iṣū‘yahb’s metropolitanate at Hidyāb.²⁷ Fiey’s proposed chronological timeframe for Iṣū‘yahb and the arrangement of his letters have led many scholars, including William Young,²⁸ Sebastian Brock, Robert Hoyland,²⁹ and Ovidio Ioan,³⁰ to disregard some letters that I believe are in fact witnesses to the Muslim Arabs as secular authorities in Nineveh during Iṣū‘yahb’s bishopric. This issue will be the subject of my discussion in chapter two.

William G. Young, a church historian and specialist in Muslim-Christian relations, served as a missionary in Pakistan from 1947. From 1966 through 1969 he was Professor of Church History at Gujranwala Theological Seminary in Pakistan. In 1970 he was appointed the bishop of Sialkot in the Church of Pakistan. In his groundbreaking article “The Church of the East in 650, Patriarch Išo‘Yab III and India” (1968), Young treated briefly the relationship between Iṣū‘yahb and the Muslim Arabs. Young claimed that Iṣū‘yahb was metropolitan of Irbil around 628 or shortly afterward—but this date does not fit the chronological timeframe of Iṣū‘yahb, as it is too early. In his important and one-of-a-kind book, titled *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph: A study of the relationships of the Church of the East with the Sassanid Empire and the early caliphates up to 820 a.d* (1975),³¹ Young treated the historical circumstances behind Iṣū‘yahb’s view of and relationship with Muslim Arabs in a larger context and

²⁵ Fiey, “Iṣō‘yaw le Grand,” (1969): 315–317.

²⁶ Iṣū‘yahb III, *Ep.* 48B. 94–96.

²⁷ Fiey, “Iṣō‘yaw le Grand,” (1969): 331.

²⁸ Young, “The Church of the East in 650,” 55–71. Also, his book *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 85–99.

²⁹ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 174–182.

³⁰ Ioan, *Muslimen und Araber bei Iṣō‘yahb III*.

³¹ Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*.

at greater depth. Young, however, follows and relies on Fiey's proposed chronology of Iṣū'yahb's life and letters.

Sebastian Brock, the leading scholar in Syriac studies, discussed Iṣū'yahb's view of the Muslim Arabs in his "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam" (1982).³² In this important and noteworthy survey of Syriac sources, Sebastian Brock looks at Iṣū'yahb's letters as a source that can help us understand how Syriac Christians accommodated the emergence of Islam into their worldview. The letters, according to Brock, convey a great deal of information about the life of the Church of the East during the transition period from Persian to Arab rule. However, Sebastian Brock follows Fiey's chronological arrangement of Iṣū'yahb's letters and states that the chronological distribution in the Syriac manuscript *Vat. Syr.* 157 in some cases cannot be correct.³³

Victoria Erhart, an expert in Late Antiquity history, particularly Syriac church history, describes the Christian situation during the early years after the Muslim Arab conquest in her well-written article "The Church of the East during the Period of the Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs" (1996).³⁴ According to Erhart, it is difficult to know how to interpret Iṣū'yahb III's remarks on Islam, which occur mainly in highly polemical, heavily rhetorical letters written in a very defensive tone. Erhart recommends that a detailed study of the full corpus of Iṣū'yahb III's letters be carried out to assess his seemingly contradictory statements about the Arabs and the providential reasons for their conquest. That is a recommendation which the present study intends to act upon.

³² Sebastian Brock, "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam," in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 9–21 (notes 199–203).

³³ Sebastian Brock, "Isho'yahb III of Adiabene," in *The Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, eds. Sebastian P. Brock et al. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011) <http://syriaca.org/bibl/298,218-219>.

³⁴ Victoria L. Erhart, "The Church of the East during the Period of the Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs," in *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78:3 (1996): 55–71.

Robert Hoyland, Professor of Late Antique and Early Islamic Middle Eastern History at New York University, and who teaches also at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World in New York, approached the subject of early Islam in an innovative study *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (1997).³⁵ Hoyland examined a large collection of historical sources in order to understand early Islam. In this survey, Hoyland discussed also the letters of Patriarch Išū'yahb III. According to Hoyland, the writings of Patriarch Išū'yahb reflect generally good relations with the Muslim Arabs. However, the Muslims are mentioned only in relation to their dealings with Christians, not as a religion *per se*. Hoyland also plainly follows Fiey's chronological arrangement of Išū'yahb's letters.

Martin Tamcke, a professor in the department of Ecumenical Theology and Oriental Church and Mission History at Georg-August-Göttingen University, Germany, and an expert in Syriac church history, discussed some aspects of Išū'yahb's life and deeds in his informative article, "The Catholicos Ischo'jahb III and Giwargis and the Arabs" (2005).³⁶ Tamcke, too, follows Fiey's chronological arrangement of Išū'yahb's letters.

Ovidiu Ioan, a scholar who concentrates his research mostly on seventh-century authors of the Church of the East, dedicated an important book on Išū'yahb and his relationship with the Muslim Arabs: *Muslime und Araber bei Išō'jahb III. (649–659)* (2009).³⁷ In his book, Ioan analyzes the letters of Išū'yahb III in connection with the history, theology, and hagiography of the Church of the East. Ioan summarizes Išū'yahb's references to the Muslim Arabs in "nine foundational theses." According to one of them, Išū'yahb accepted that God has given the Arabs an empire. The Arab conquest is treat-

³⁵ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 178–182.

³⁶ Martin Tamcke, "The Catholicos Ischo'jahb III and Giwargis and the Arabs." in *Les Syriaques Transmetteurs de Civilisations. L'Expérience du Bilâd el-Shâm à l'Époque Omeyyade*, ed. Ray Jabre Mouawad. Patrimoine Syriaque, Actes du Colloque IX. Antélias (Liban: Centre d'Études et de Recherches Orientales / Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), 199–210.

³⁷ Ioan, *Muslime und Araber bei Išō'jahb III*.

ed as an event in world politics. The Arabs are not hostile to Christianity. They praised Išū'yahb's own belief system, i.e. that of the Church of the East. They honor the priests and the saints of the Church of the East. They have shown themselves helpful towards the churches and monasteries. Ioan's book is an important study that seeks to understand the hagiographical aspects in Išū'yahb's letters. This is an important step upon which I would like to build. However, also Ioan follows Fiey's chronological analysis.

Herman Teule, Professor emeritus in Eastern Christianity at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, and specialist in the field of Middle Eastern Christianity and Islam, focuses on two of Išū'yahb's letters (*Ep.* 48B and *Ep.* 14C) in his bibliographical article "Isho'yahb III of Adiabene" (2009),³⁸ Teule explicitly states that Letter 48B dates back to the time of Išū'yahb's episcopate, a statement that contradicts Fiey's dating. However, Teule dated the letter to a time before the year 637, which is rather contrary to the historical circumstances in which the letter was written because it mentions the Muslims Arabs who arrived in the region of Nineveh in the middle of 637. Though Teule correctly attributes the letters to the time of Išū'yahb's bishopric, he still follows Fiey's chronological arrangement.

Michael Philip Penn, Professor of religion and gender studies at Mount Holyoke College and expert in Syriac historiography and Muslim-Christian relations in early Islam, presents, in his recently published book *When Christian First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (2015),³⁹ a collection of Christian historical sources from the first two centuries of Islam that mention Muslims and Islam directly or indirectly. Išū'yahb's letters are included among these sources.⁴⁰ Penn not only discusses the statement of Išū'yahb about Muslims but also presents his own translation of selected passages of the original Syriac text. However, Penn deals with only three of Išū'yahb's letters: Letters 48B, 14C, and

³⁸ Teule, "Isho'yahb III of Adiabene," 133–136.

³⁹ Penn, *When Christian First Met Muslims*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29–36.

15B. Penn refers briefly to the doubts of other scholars regarding the chronological arrangement of Iṣū'yahb's letters. He states that: "No one has contested the attribution of these letters to Iṣho'yahb III. ... most recent scholars, however, suggest that a later scribe misordered several of the letters, including 48B, which they say belongs to the period when Iṣho'yahb was a metropolitan or catholicos."⁴¹ Penn does not offer his own judgment but he follows the others regarding the chronological arrangement by taking 637 as the year of Iṣū'yahb's appointment as metropolitan on Ḥidyāb.

Marikje Metselaar, a specialist in the history of Eastern Christianity with major focus on the Church of the East and its doctrinal development. In her valuable dissertation "Defining Christ: The Church of the East and Nascent Islam" (2016),⁴² Metselaar examines chronologically the development of Christology and its terms in the Church of the East from the fourth up to the end of the seventh centuries. Metselaar dedicates most of her attention to the letters of Iṣū'yahb III in the context of a nascent Islam. In her dissertation, she concludes that the allocation of several letters of Iṣū'yahb III is clearly wrong or disputable, and the reconstruction of many events remains therefore tentative. However, Metselaar does not completely follow Fiey's assumption that the last episcopal letters were misplaced and belonged to Iṣū'yahb's metropolitan period. Metselaar suggests an alternative interpretation for some events mentioned in Iṣū'yahb III's letters, which would justify that letter 48B, which dealt with Arabs, belonged to his bishopric period. According to Metselaar, letter 48B is the only letter in which Iṣū'yahb III explicitly referred to the religion of the Muslim Arab rulers. Though Metselaar correctly attributes letter 48B to the time of Iṣū'yahb's bishopric, she

⁴¹ Ibid., 32.

⁴² Marikje Metselaar, "Defining Christ: The Church of the East and Nascent Islam," Ph.D. dissertation (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2016).

misses the interrelation between this letter and other letters during Iṣū'yahb's episcopacy which also refer to the Muslim Arabs.⁴³

SUMMARY OF THE EXISTING LITERATURE

For the most part, the above-mentioned scholars follow Fiey's familiar pattern, including his opinion regarding the chronological order of the letters, with the exception of Marijke Metselaar who did not only express doubt about Fiey's opinion regarding the chronological order of the letters, but also, she suggested an alternative interpretation of six letters, Ep. 50B-52B, and Ep. 1M-2M, and most importantly Ep. 48B which Fiey concluded to be misplaced as it dealt with Arab governors.⁴⁴ According to most of the scholars, the Muslim Arabs were not mentioned by Iṣū'yahb when he was bishop of Nineveh, or for few (Metselaar and Teule) their attention was limited to *Ep. 48B*, which prevented them from looking elsewhere for additional information about the Muslim Arabs.

Under the leadership of Patriarch Maremmeh the relationship with the Muslim Arabs was described as good. The main concern of Iṣū'yahb was consolidating his church. The rise to power of Muslim Arabs was presented as God's will. They aided churches and monasteries and revered priests and monks. They praised the faith of the Christians. They demanded payments (poll tax) from the Christians, but did not force those in Mazūn to abandon their faith. The Muslim Arabs were courted by the Jacobites as well as the Nestorians. What was said about Muslim Arabs had to do first with Christians, their doctrines, and their religion, but there are no references to Islam apart from Christianity. Most studies regarding Iṣū'yahb's view of the Muslim Arabs are focused on two letters, *Ep. 48B* and *Ep. 14C*. Most of these studies are fair accounts of Iṣū'yahb's later view of

⁴³ Metselaar's dissertation will be published as a monograph by the end of 2019, see Marijke Metselaar, *Defining Christ: The Church of the East and Nascent Islam*. Series: Late Antique History and Religion, 19, (Louvain: Peeters Publishers, forthcoming 2019).

⁴⁴ See Metselaar, "Defining Christ: The Church of the East and Nascent Islam," 222–223, 372.

the Muslim Arabs, especially from the time of his patriarchate, but the present study aims to explore how his views emerged over time.

A NEW APPROACH

The thought of Iṣū'yahb emerged from a particular social, political, and religious situation over the course of many years, and therefore, a historical-critical method of exploring the writings of Iṣū'yahb is needed in order to trace the development and significance of the author's writings (his letters) within their specific historical contexts. This is what Victoria Erhart called for and what Ovidiu Ioan in *Muslime und Araber bei Iṣō'yahb III. (649-659)* and Marijke Metselaar in "Defining Christ: The Church of the East and Nascent Islam" attempted. However, in my study I would like to reconstruct the development of Iṣū'yahb's view toward Islam by re-examining the chronological aspects of some letters written during his bishopric of Nineveh in addition to Ep. 48B, which according to my opinion contain references to Muslim Arabs; these references were overlooked by Jean Maurice Fiey and the many scholars who have followed Fiey's analysis. This issue will be taken up in Chapter Two. Then, the question of Iṣū'yahb's efforts to build up a platform of collaboration, or rather, a loyal and stable friendship between the Arabs and the Church of the East, will be discussed according to Iṣū'yahb's three approaches which correspond to three periods in his career. This is the topic of Chapter Three.

In Chapter Four, I will not only return to the monastic and theological backgrounds of Iṣū'yahb's views but will point to specific texts that the patriarch relied on, and how intertextual correspondences and mirroring affected his portrayal of the Muslim Arabs as well as his understanding of his church and his own role in it. At the end, a fifth, brief chapter gathers the book's conclusions: a new interpretation of Iṣū'yahb's letters toward Islam and the Muslim Arabs; and his strategies for the consolidation and preservation of the church.

CHAPTER ONE. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE “CHURCH OF THE EAST”

The term “Church of the East” refers to the Christian communities that in the early Christian centuries were found east of the Roman-Persian border and whose patriarch, known also as the catholicos, had his see at the Persian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The Christian Church in the Persian territory is also known as the “East Syriac Church.” It is a term that refers to the Syriac Christian tradition in Persia that used the Syriac/Aramaic language to express its faith. Another name is the “Persian Church,” since the Church of the East was located mostly within the territory of the Persian Empire. In addition, the same church was known for centuries as the “Nestorian Church.” This name comes from the patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius (d. 451), who maintained the doctrine of two persons in Jesus Christ which was the Christological doctrine of the school of Antioch represented mainly by Diodore of Tarsus (d. 390) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428). The Church of the East adopted this Christology at the end of the fifth century and honored Nestorius as a teacher and saint; however, he is not the founder of the Christological doctrine of the Church of the East.

During the sixteenth century, part of the Church of the East declared its allegiance to the Roman pontiff and came to be known as the “Chaldean Catholic Church.” Nowadays the Church of the East is represented by two different ecclesiastic jurisdictions: the “Holy

Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East” and the “Ancient Church of the East.”¹

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY IN PERSIA

Christianity spread in Persia during the rule of the Parthians and the early period of the Sasanian dominion. According to early traditions, such as the *Doctrine of Adday*,² a Christian mission led by Saint Thomas the Apostle, and then Adday and his two disciples Aḡay and Mārī, came from Jerusalem and spread Christianity in Mesopotamia and other remote places in Persia.³ This tradition has been prominent since the fourth century. For example, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī mentioned that Adday then Aḡay were the first apostles who spread Christianity in Edessa and Mesopotamia,⁴ and the canonist Ibn at-Ṭayyib (d. 1043) stated that the East was the missionary territory of Adday, Aḡay and Mārī, while India and China belonged to the territory of St. Thomas.⁵ Also, according to the history of ‘Amr b.

¹ See Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 1–5. Suha Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq: Its Origins and Development to the Present Day* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2005), table 4.

² W. Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents Relative to the Earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the Neighboring Countries* (Whitefish, Montana, USA: Literary Licensing LLC, 2014), 6–23, 108–109.

³ Gregorius Barhebraeus, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, ed. Joannes Baptista Abbeloos et Thomas Josephus Lamy, 3 vols (Parisii & Lovanii: A. Maisonneuve & C. Peeters, 1874), vol. 3, 16.

⁴ ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī was a ninth century Nestorian theologian. See Mark Beaumont, “‘Ammār al-Baṣrī,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History. Volume 1 (600–900)*, ed., by David Thomas and Barbara Roggema et al, History of Christian-Muslim Relations 11 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 604–610.

⁵ Abū al-Faraḡ ‘Abdallāh ibn al-Ṭayyib (d. 1043) was a philosopher, theologian, and biblical exegete in Arabic. Cf. Gerhard Endress, “Ibn al-Ṭayyib’s Arabic Version and Commentary of Aristotle’s *De Caelo*,” *Studia graeco-arabica* 7 (2017): 213–275.

Mattā,⁶ it was Mārī who established the patriarchal see at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, becoming the first catholicos.⁷ In addition, Mārī is considered the one who organized the liturgy in the Church of the East.⁸

In the second century, Christian communities were already established in different parts of the Persian territories. The *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, written by Philip, a pupil of the Aramaic philosopher and astrologer, Bardaisan of Edessa,⁹ mentions Christians in “Parthia, Kušān, Persia, Media, Edessa, Ḥaṭṭrā, and Fars, and among other places.”¹⁰ It seems that Christianity spread from Edessa and Nisibis into the Parthian empire, where many pagans and Jews who spoke Aramaic converted to Christianity by missionaries coming from the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire.¹¹ Trade played an important role in spreading Christianity in the East, when Christian merchants traveled the trade routes from the Mediterranean to Persia and beyond, bringing with them their religion.

Another factor contributing to the development of Christianity in Persia was the series of mass deportations from neighboring Roman territories during the Roman-Persian wars. Many deportees from the Roman territory were Christians who had been captured by

⁶ ‘Amr ibn Mattā is an author of the Church of the East from the twelfth century. Cf. Mark N. Swanson, “‘Amr ibn Mattā,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History. Volume 2 (900–1050)*, ed., by David Thomas et al (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 627–632.

⁷ Amir Harrak, ed. *The Acts of Mār Mārī the Apostle*, SBL Writings from the Greco-Roman World 11 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

⁸ Anthony Gelston, ed. *The Eucharistic Prayer of Addai and Mari* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press / Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁹ Bardaisan (154–222) was well-known as ‘Aramaic philosopher’ and astrologist. He is the earliest known Syriac author from Edessa. Cf. Alberto Camplani, “Bardesane et les Bardesanites,” *Annuaire de l’École Pratique des Hautes Études, Section des Sciences Religieuses* 112 (2003–2004): 29–50.

¹⁰ Cf. W. Cureton, “Bardesan-The Book of the Laws of Countries,” in *Spicilegium Syriacum: containing remains of Bardesan, Meliton, Ambrose, and Mara Bar Serapion* (London: Rivingtons, 1855), 32–33.

¹¹ Cf. Philip Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22.

the Persian king Shapūr I (240–272), when his forces had advanced far into Roman territory and captured many Christians from Antioch, Cappadocia, Cilicia, and other cities in Syria and Upper Mesopotamia. These captives were then deported to Persian provinces and established as tradesmen and artisans in Babylonia, Persia, Parthia, and Susiana.¹² However, during the first three centuries of Christianity, the church was still numerically small and subject to local persecutions. These were mainly instigated by Magians before there was any real relationship between the State and the Church to provide Christianity institutional organization and set norms for its treatment.¹³

MAGIANS AND ZOROASTRIANS

In 225 the Parthians were defeated by Ardashīr I (224–242), who established the new Sasanian dynasty and introduced significant changes regarding imperial administration, politics, and religious policies. Sasanian rule was more centralized and stressed loyalty toward their empire. Zoroastrianism became the religion of the state. Zoroastrians and Magians were the major religious opponents with whom Christians clashed.¹⁴ In the fifth century B.C., Herodotus traced the origins of the Magians to one of the five Median tribes, and suggested that the religious leaders known as Mobeds came from the Magians. Others suggested a Babylonian origin, believing that when Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., the Magians of Babylonia continued their astrology in the service of the new king and religion. From the time of Darius I (550–486 BC) onwards, the Magians were the official priests of the Achaemenid rulers and played an important role at the royal court, where they enjoyed great influence. Along with their religious functions, they were also engaged in administrative and economic activities.¹⁵ According to Stra-

¹² Cf. Baum, *The Church of the East*, 7–11.

¹³ Cf. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 8–16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

¹⁵ Richard T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (Chicago: Oriental Institute Publications, 1969), 757–759.

bo, Magian activity continued under Parthian rule and the Magian fire cult had a strong presence in certain places in Eastern Anatolia, such as Cappadocia.¹⁶ Strabo also mentions that the fire altars of the Magians were found in sacred places inside temples where they kept the fire always burning, and that during their ritual worship, the Magians held packs of sticks and wore tall turbans before the fire.¹⁷ During the Sasanian period, the Magians became a powerful class in the society. They supported the royal authority, were exempt from paying the head tax, and had their own lands in Media.

The origins of Zoroastrianism can be traced back to a historical figure of Zoroaster who lived in the sixth century B.C. He was a member of the Magian tribe from Media. According to his prophetic writings, he opposed the magical and pagan practices of the Magians. His basic teaching was dualistic: there are two original spirits who reveal themselves as twins in thought, word, and action, and can be characterized as Good/Evil or Better/Worse. The wise know how to properly choose between the two spirits, whereas the foolish do not.¹⁸ Zoroaster believed in one eternal good God, Ahura-Mazda, who has six attendant spirits but should not be associated with any idol. Zoroaster also taught that there is one eternal evil god, called Ahriman, who likewise has six attendant spirits. Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman are equal in strength, but the wise follow Ahura-Mazda because Ahriman will be destroyed at the end of time.

Zoroaster taught that in order to follow Ahura-Mazda, people must abandon nomadic life and settle down to lead a life of agriculture, to do their best to be merciful and righteous, to avoid sacrificing living animals, and to give up sorcery and magic. Those who follow this ethical conduct will inherit eternal life in heaven. According to tradition, Zoroaster went to preach among the Persians in South-East Media, among nomads and bandits. He was successful in his mission to some extent but at the age of 77 he was murdered. After

¹⁶ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 110.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁸ Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 4.

his death, some of Zoroaster's teachings were accepted by the Achaemenids and many of the Magians customs and beliefs were merged into Zoroastrianism; the religious leaders of the Magians (Mobeds) became Zoroastrian priests.

While the Parthians were followers of Zoroastrianism, they were not strict in their religious beliefs. The Sasanians, however, were more enthusiastic in following Zoroastrianism. The first Sasanian ruler, Ardashīr I (226–241), considered Magians equal to the nobility, and Shapūr II issued an edict according to which any Magian or Zoroastrian who apostatized would be punishable by death. In the second half of the third century AD, the famous religious leader Kartīr tried to establish a radical form of Zoroastrianism as the state religion in Iran and Asia Minor. At the same time, he fought against other religious movements such as Christianity and Manicheism.¹⁹ The confrontation between Christianity and Zoroastrianism was not limited only to the level of belief and worship, but also to aspects of social morality and politics. For example, a decree of Shapūr II from about 340 made the following accusations against Christians:

These Christians destroy our holy teaching, and teach men to serve one God, and not to honor the Sun and the Fire. They defile Water by their ablutions, they refrain from marriage and the propagation of children, and refuse to go to war with the King of Kings. They have no rules about slaughter and eating animals; they bury the corpses of men in the earth. They attribute the

¹⁹ Jes P. Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran. Vol. 3(2): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. by Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 924–948; Philippe Gignoux, "Sur Quelques Relations entre Chrétiens et Mazdéens d'après des Sources Syriaques," *Studia Iranica* 28/1 (1999): 83–94; Richard J. H. Gottheil, "References to Zoroaster in Syriac and Arabic Literature," in *Classical Studies in Honour of Henry Drisler* (New York and London: Macmillan and Co., 1894), 24–51; Louis H. Gray, "Zoroastrian and Other Ethnic Religious Material in the Acta Sanctorum," *Journal of the Manchester Egyptian and Oriental Society* (1913–1914): 37–55.

origin of snakes and creeping things to a good God. They despise many servants of the king and teach witchcraft.²⁰

Around the year 544, the Magians made accusations against Marī Abā I, the patriarch of the Church of the East, to Khosrow I (531–579). According to these accusations, Marī Abā had renounced the religion of his fathers and become a Christian, prohibited the Christians from marrying more than one wife at a time, negated the decrees of the judges and took away cases from their jurisdiction, and had had Magians baptized, converting them to Christianity. After many years in prison, Marī Abā was executed by the order of the king himself.²¹ It was within such religious, political and social context that Christianity grew and spread, succeeding and suffering at the same time.

THE RISE OF THE EPISCOPAL SEE OF SELEUCIA-CTESIPHON

By the beginning of the fourth-century, a kind of a centralized ecclesiastical body for the Church of the East started to take shape with a special consideration given to the bishop of the capital city of the Sasanians, Seleucia-Ctesiphon. In this period, Papā, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, claimed a position of primacy over the other bishops in the Persian territories.²² Papā's attempt to establish himself as the highest authority over the rest of the bishops in Persia met with strong opposition. The other bishops met in Seleucia-Ctesiphon around the year 315 and deposed Papā from the bishopric of Seleucia-Ctesiphon; an archdeacon named Šem'un Barsbae was appointed in his place. However, Papā appealed to the bishop of Edessa in the Roman territory, who with other "Western fathers" supported him. The charges against Papā were annulled and he continued as bishop

²⁰ Quoted in Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 6.

²¹ L. Van Rompay, "Aba I," in *The Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock et al. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 1, 1.

²² Cf. Jean-Maurice Fiey, "Les Étapes de la Prise de Conscience de son Identité Patriarcale par l'Église Syrienne Orientale," *L'Orient Syrien* 12 (1967): 3–22.

of Seleucia-Ctesiphon for another 12 years. He died peacefully around 328 and was succeeded by Šem‘ūn Barsbae. According to the *Chronicle of Arbela*, Papā’s claim of supremacy was founded on the fact that he was bishop of the royal residence, and his claim was also supported by the “Western fathers” who regarded him as the first head of the Persian Church. The opposition against the claim of supremacy made by the bishop of the capital city indicates that, at the beginning of the fourth century, a series of independently organized dioceses existed in the Persian Empire.²³

PERSECUTIONS UNDER SASANIANS

Under the Parthians, many Christians escaped the Roman persecutions and took refuge in Persia. However, at the same time as the Roman religious policy towards Christians changed after the edict of Milan in 311, Christians were being persecuted by the Sasanians who replaced the Parthians in Persia in 224. This persecution against the Christians of Persia was instigated by the Zoroastrians who were threatened by Christian missionary advances and proselytism. The persecutions occurred also due to political reasons. After the conversion of Constantine to Christianity and the adoption of Christianity as an official faith of the Roman Empire, Christians became politically suspect in Persia, as they were thought to be Roman spies. The Syriac author Aphrahat wrote around 337:

The people of God have received prosperity and success awaits the man who has been the instrument of that prosperity [Constantine]; but disaster threatens the army which has been gathered together by the efforts of a wicked and proud man puffed up with vanity [Shapūr]... The [Roman] empire will not be conquered, for the hero whose name is Jesus is coming with his

²³ Cf. W. A. Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church, or, The Church of the Sassanid Persian Empire, 100–640 A.D.* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 14–18; André de Halleux, “Autonomy and Centralization in the Ancient Syriac Churches: Edessa and Seleucia-Ctesiphon,” in *Wort und Wahrheit*, supplementary Issue 4 (Vienna: Herder, 1978), 59–67.

power, and his armor will uphold the whole army of the empire.²⁴

Aphrahat expected Constantine to invade Persia and conquer the area in which he lived. He warned his own king Shapūr II (309–379) of the uselessness of attacking the Romans. He argued that God had ordained the defeat of Persia and predicted that the Roman Empire would exist until the end of the world. Aphrahat's fifth *Demonstration* is a clear proof of how the Christians of Persia stood completely on Rome's side with their sympathies.²⁵ Therefore, Shāpūr regarded his Christian subjects as a potential fifth column.²⁶ After being defeated outside Nisibis by the Romans, Shapūr II started a persecution of Christians in Persia. When Šem'un, bishop of Seleucia, refused to comply with the extortion of higher taxes, the Sasanian king initiated systematic persecutions of Christians in the entire Sasanian Empire. Christians of Persia were accused of disloyalty and Šem'un was arrested as a traitor. All Christians were ordered to pay double taxes thereafter. Šem'un was executed and with him no fewer than a hundred martyrs. Persecutions of Christians lasted for forty years (339–379). Numerous acts of martyrs from this period have been preserved.²⁷

²⁴ Joan Zouberi, "The Role of Religion in the Foreign Affairs of Sasanian Iran and the Later Roman Empire (330–630 A.D.)," *Historia i Świat* 6 (2017): 121–132, the quotation is in page 124.

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 124–125.

²⁶ T. Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians of Persia," *JRS* 75 (1985):126–136.

²⁷ See W. A. Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church, or, The Church of the Sassanid Persian Empire, 100–640 A.D.* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 19–22; Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2014), 138–144; John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 17–35; Rafal Kosiński, "The Date of the Martyrdom of Simeon bar Sabba'e and the Persecution of Christians in Persia under Shapur II," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 21/3 (2017): 496–519; Wolfgang Schwaigert, "Aspects

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH AND THE RECEPTION OF THE FAITH OF NICAEA

Council of Marī Isaac (410)²⁸

During the reign of Yazdegard I (399–421), the situation of the Christians improved. Yazdegard I sought peace with Rome and saw that the Christian hierarchy of Persia played an essential role in communication between the two empires. The bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and other bishops from the Church of the East led several Persian diplomatic missions to the Christian Roman empire. Likewise, the Roman Empire was represented by delegates at Persian courts. Yazdegard I released Christian prisoners and ordered their churches to be rebuilt. This positive policy toward the Christians in Persia occurred thanks to the influence of Bishop Maruthā of Maipherkat, who was at the same time one of the members of the delegation to Persia. The diplomatic skills of Bishop Maruthā contributed to the first Synod in the Church of the East which was held under Isaac, the metropolitan bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in 410. While the impetus for the first recorded synod came from Maruthā of Maipherkat, the synod was convoked by the Sasanian king Yazdegard I. In this synod Yazdegard I is called “the victorious King of Kings, on whom the churches rely for peace,”²⁹ while Isaac is honored and named for the first time as catholicos, “judged by God worthy of the gift of all the East.”³⁰ The Synod reorganized the church after the persecutions and confirmed the primacy of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The opening text of the synod emphasizes that each city should only have a single bishop and that all should have the same sacred days that were established in the Nicene canons. The text ends with a prayer

of the Persecution of Christians in the Sasanian Empire during the Reign of Shapūr II (309–379),” *The Harp* 1/2–3 (1988): 73–82.

²⁸ Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church*, 25–31.

²⁹ Scott John McDonough, “A Second Constantine? The Sasanian King Yazdegard in Christian History and Historiography,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1/1 (2008): 127–140.

³⁰ Cf. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert*, 32.

for the king and for all the notables “who wish to live in peace with the church of God.”³¹ In the first session of the Synod, a letter from the “Western” fathers was read before the assembled bishops. This letter was brought by Maruthā and was signed by several bishops from Syria and Upper Mesopotamia. The letter emphasized three points which were eventually adopted by the synod and well-defined in the canons: first, in each city and its surrounding region there should be only one bishop, ordained by three bishops. Second, the liturgical feasts of Epiphany, Lent, and Easter should be celebrated together and on the same days. Third, the creed and canons of the Council of Nicaea (325) should be adopted. In this synod, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the imperial capital, became the head of the Church of the East. His primacy was confirmed and supported by the approval of the Persian king who called the synod. The primacy of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon over the other bishops in Persia followed the model of the patriarchal structure of the Roman Empire. Later the hierarchical order of the metropolitans was established with the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon named first, followed by the metropolitans of Beth Lapat, Nisibis, Prat d-Maišan, Irbil, and Karkha of Beth Slukh.

The establishment of the primacy of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was based on purely political grounds. In the synodical acts of 410 there is no mention of an apostolic origin for the see. The letter from the “Western fathers” was signed by the bishop of Antioch and his bishops, but he signed in the name of his Church in the Roman Empire and he did not make any claim of jurisdiction over the Persian church. In this Synod and through its synodical acts, the Persian church understood itself as an autonomous and autocephalous church standing in communion with the Church of the Roman Empire. The final session of the Synod issued canons which articulate the need for a centralized church, where all elected bishops must be perfected by the catholicos in a secondary ordination and be

³¹ Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil Synodes Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 18 and 34; and Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert*, 32.

gathered at a twice-yearly synod at Seleucia-Ctesiphon to “honor the catholicos.” Bishops could not ordain one another alone, nor could an excommunicated bishop be replaced without the agreement of the catholicos or a metropolitan. Also, it was the catholicos who could determine the liturgical year.³²

The unity of the Church of the East under the leadership of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was strongly emphasized at the synod of Yahballahā I (420), which was again held with the support of a Western bishop, Akakios of Amid. The bishops of the synod recognized Yahballahā as “head and regent over us and all our brother-bishops in the whole of the empire.”³³ However, the bishops of Seleucia-Ctesiphon before the fifth century had no continuous history as leaders of the Church of the East.³⁴

Declaration of independence of the Church of the East in 424

By the end of the reign of Yazdegard I (d. 421) and under Bahram V (421–38), the Christians were seen by the Persian authority as loyal to the Romans and rivals to Zoroastrianism.³⁵ Christianity was no longer limited to the Syriac/Aramaic-speaking population, as many upper-class Persians had converted to Christianity. Moreover, in this period there were internal disputes in the church over the see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Bishop Dadišūʿ of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was slan-

³² Ibid., 34; Victoria L. Erhart, “The Development of Syriac Christian Canon Law in the Sasanian Empire,” in *Law, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity*, ed. Ralph W. Mathisen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 115–129.

³³ Cf. Baum, *The Church of the East*, 14–17.

³⁴ Cf. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert*, 31; Stephen Gero, “The Status of the Patriarchs of Seleucia-Ctesiphon,” in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, edited by N. Garsoïan, Th. F. Mathews and R. W. Thomson (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Pub Service, 1982), 45–51; Erhart, “The Development of Syriac Christian Canon law,” 115–130.

³⁵ Geoffrey Herman, “The Last Years of Yazdgird I and the Christians,” in *Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians: Religious Dynamics in a Sasanian Context*, ed., by Geoffrey Herman, *Judaism in Context* 17 (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2014), 77–100.

dered as a Roman sympathizer and placed in prison, where he stayed until around 422 when a peace treaty was concluded between emperor Theodosius II (408–450) and Bahram V (420–438). After his release, Bishop Dadīšūʿ returned to his monastery and wanted to abdicate his position as bishop of the capital. However, at the Synod of Markabtā 424, all the metropolitans as well the bishops persuaded him to resume his office as patriarch in order to reorganize the church after the persecutions. At this synod no bishop from the Roman Empire was present, as had happened in 410 and 420. The synod of 424 is widely regarded as the occasion on which the Church of the East stated its claim to autocephaly through the rejection of the right of appeal to the West. In this synod, the unity of the Church of the East under its own single head who was then called *catholicos* was stressed. It forbade settling internal ecclesiastical issues by allowing patriarchs from outside to interfere; rather, these issues should be solved internally.³⁶

The Church of the East and Dyophysitism

In 428, Nestorius became the patriarch of Constantinople. He taught that Christ had two natures, divine and human. The two natures remained clearly distinguishable and therefore Mary was not properly termed the “Mother of God.” Nestorius reflected the Christological teaching of the Antiochian theological school represented by the exegetical writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) and Diodore of Tarsus (d. 390). Cyril of Alexandria, in contrast, argued that the two natures of Christ became inseparably one after His incarnation. Cyril emphasized the unity of divinity and humanity in Christ, the “one nature (*mia physis*) of the Word incarnate.” Cyril opposed Nestorius who later was excommunicated at the Council of

³⁶ Cf. Baum, *The Church of the East*, 19–21; Sebastian Brock, “The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to the Early Seventh Centuries: Preliminary Considerations and Materials,” in *Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity*, ed., Everett Ferguson, Recent Studies in Early Christianity. 4 (New York: Garland, 1992), 125–142; Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church*, 32–35.

Ephesus in 431 and exiled to Egypt.³⁷ Many followers of the Antiochian Christological teaching were forced to flee from Byzantine territories and especially from Edessa, where there were many students who had come from Persia to study at its famous theological school. The followers of Nestorius took refuge in Nisibis and other places in the Persian empire, and many of them became bishops with great influence on the doctrinal development of the Church of the East. The Christians who fled from Byzantine territories because of doctrinal issues and who came to Persia received greater consideration from the Persian authorities than those who maintained relationships with the Byzantines. Thanks to Metropolitan Barsawma of Nisibis, who had been also appointed governor of the border area by the Persian king, dyophysitism succeeded in establishing a foothold in Persian territory. The influence of Barsawma on the Persian king resulted in gaining his support for Nestorianism.³⁸ The Persians feared Byzantine infiltration in Persia through the appointment of local bishops loyal to Constantinople, so Barsawma assigned to strategic locations only men of his faith. This may explain why the Church of the East adopted the Nestorian doctrine in the year 484 at the synod of Beth Lapat, and then again at the Synod of Aqāq in 486 and the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 497.³⁹

The Church of the East in the sixth century

A period of religious tolerance began when the Sasanian king Kavad I recovered his throne in 496 and ruled until 531.⁴⁰ Under the patriarchate of Babay (497–503), the ecclesiastical centers of the Church of the East were well organized. The major ecclesiastical centers were Beth Lapat, Nisibis, Prat d-Maišan, Ḥidyāb, Karkha of Beth Slukh,

³⁷ Émile Amann, “Nestorius, I. Nestorius et sa Doctrine,” in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1931), 76–157.

³⁸ Stephen Gero, *Barṣawma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the Fifth Century*. CSCO 426, Subs. 63 (Louvain: Peeters, 1981).

³⁹ Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500*, 187–190 and 193–204.

⁴⁰ Kavad I ruled for the first time from 488 to 496 and the second time from 498 to 531 (when he recovered his throne).

and Merv, as well as Riv-Ardashīr in Fars, which became a metropolitanate in the sixth century. In addition, there were several independent bishoprics that were under the immediate authority of the catholicos in Seleucia-Ctesiphon.⁴¹ Catholicos Babay was succeeded by Silas (503–523) who before his death nominated his son-in-law Elišāʿ as his successor. Elišāʿ was uncanonically installed as catholicos and an opposing candidate, Narses from Khuzestan, was nominated and ordained. This action resulted in a fifteen-year schism within the church. At a synod in 539 Elišāʿ resigned from his office, and Paul of Khuzestan was selected as the new catholicos, he enjoyed great favor with King Khosrow I. Paul died just two months after his election and the bishops chose Abā I (540–552), as a new patriarch. Abā I had been a high-ranking Zoroastrian and secretary to the governor of the province of Beth Garmay. He converted to Christianity and studied at the school of Nisibis. According to some sources he travelled to Jerusalem, Alexandria, Constantinople, Athens, and Corinth. He taught in Nisibis, wrote biblical commentaries, and translated Greek texts into Syriac. After his election as catholicos, he founded his own theological school in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and began to reform the church with great energy. He summoned a synod in 544 with the major scope of restoring the unity of the Church under the patriarchal see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, which had been destroyed by the schism of the preceding fifteen years.⁴² Abā was succeeded by Joseph (552–67), who was appointed through the intervention of King Khosrow I. A synod took place under him and a profession of faith in Christ produced by the synod confirmed the councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). In the Synod of 554, the bishop of Kaškar was assigned to the patriarchal province as vicar of the catholicos. He was responsible for organizing the election of a new patriarch upon the vacancy of the see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Catholicos

⁴¹ John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church, 450–680 AD*. The Church in history. 2 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989); John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: A Church on Fire* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928).

⁴² Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church*, 54–65.

Joseph was unpopular and because of his harsh behavior he was removed from office and was replaced by Ezekiel (570–582), who was a student of Patriarch Abā I.⁴³ Ezekiel was succeeded by Iṣū'yahb I of Arzūn (582–596), another former student of Nisibis. He summoned a synod in which the hierarchy of the Church of the East was given a theological foundation. The ecclesiastical structure was placed parallel to the heavenly one. By this reasoning, church order was set forth as divine, the patriarch equated with the apostles Peter and Paul, and the patriarchal see placed on an apostolic footing. In canon 29 of the same synod, one reads that the Holy Spirit “designated four patriarchs in the West, and he chose a fifth patriarch for the Orient.”⁴⁴ The Church of the East thus considered itself one of the five patriarchates of the universal Church. In this period, a crisis occurred in the school of Nisibis because of Ḥanāna of Ḥidyāb. He was a highly respected and exceptional teacher in Nisibis who inspired many with his exegetical works, his humility, and his ascetic lifestyle. He exerted a great influence on East Syriac monasticism, which since 486 (when marriage was encouraged over celibacy) had decreased significantly. However, in his writings Ḥanāna deviated from the official doctrinal consensus of the Church of the East and attacked the obligatory authority of Theodore of Mopsuestia.⁴⁵ Ḥanāna of Ḥidyāb was condemned as a heretic in 585 by Patriarch Iṣū'yahb I of Arzūn and again in 596 by the Synod convoked by the newly elected Patriarch Sabrīšū'. In 596 Khosrow II elevated the ascetic bishop of Lashom, Sabrīšū', as Iṣū'yahb's successor at the synod of 596. Under Sabrīšū' I (596–604), who had once been a hermit himself, monasticism was again fully integrated into the church.⁴⁶

⁴³ Cf. Baum, *The Church of the East*, 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

⁴⁶ Ignazio Guidi, “Die Kirchengeschichte des Catholikos Sabhrīšō' I,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 40 (1886): 559–561; Martin Tamcke, “The Ecclesiology of Catholicos-Patriarch Sabrīšō' I,” *The Harp* 1:2–3 (1987–1988): 83–92; Florence Jullien, *Le Monachisme en Perse: la réforme d'Abraham le Grand, Père des Moines de l'Orient*. CSCO 622, Subs. 121 (Leuven: Peeters, 2008).

Monasticism in the Church of the East and its revival in the sixth century

Before the development of monasticism in Egypt, organized communities of men and women who had committed themselves to sexual abstinence and the service of the church appeared in many places in Mesopotamia. It seems that the Syriac Christian church developed local traditions of people dedicated to the monastic life even before the organized Egyptian monastic movement in the fourth century. It is true that some Syriac sources narrate how monasticism was introduced into Syria and Mesopotamia by an Egyptian group of monks led by certain saint named Awgen. But based on ancient sources, many scholars deny the Egyptian origin theory of Syrian and Mesopotamian monasticism. Arthur Vööbus, who studied Syriac monasticism in its early stages, emphasized this point of view by saying that “in contrast to the Coptic and Greek monasticism in Egypt and Greek monasticism in Palestine and Asia Minor, Syrian monasticism is obvious as an independent phenomenon stimulated by its own spiritual genius.”⁴⁷ In contrast to the Egyptian monks who felt the need to escape from the burdens of the temporal world in order to imitate Christ in the desert, the Syrian ascetics did not feel this need.⁴⁸ They remained in the world in which they were born; however, they considered it their duty to serve and transform their communities into celestial ones by giving testimony through their deeds and lives before the congregations. They did not avoid situations of daily life. They accepted food and protection from their lay brethren and remained active participants in ecclesial life, embracing the culture around them. According to Vööbus, the roots of monastic life in Mesopotamia go back to Jewish groups such as the Covenanters of Qumran who were attracted to the Christian message (however this

⁴⁷ Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, vol. 2, CSCO 197/Subs. 17 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1960), 29.

⁴⁸ Florence Jullien, “Aux Sources du Monachisme Oriental: Abraham de Kashkar et le Développement de la Légende de Mar Awgin,” *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 225:1 (2008): 37–52.

is not mainstream thought now) and contributed to the formation of a Palestinian Aramean Christian group.⁴⁹

In the second half of the sixth century, the monastic life was revived after a period of decline by Abraham of Kaškar, who is considered “the head of the monks” and “father of the ascetics.”⁵⁰ Abraham of Kaškar founded a great monastery on Mount Izlā, on the southern edge of the Tūr ‘Abdīn, which became a spiritual and theological center for the Church of the East in the sixth and seventh centuries.⁵¹ Abraham of Kaškar established eleven rules which emphasise quietude, fasting, prayer, study, and silence. There are no rules about dress or food, and no clear vow of obedience. Each monk had a cell of his own where he spent the greater part of each day in solitude; the life in a monastery was simply a preparation for the life of absolute solitude in a cell.⁵²

⁴⁹ Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, vol. 2. CSCO, 197/Subs. 17 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1960), 29–30.

⁵⁰ Florence Jullien, “Abraham of Kaškar,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2015, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abraham-of-kaskar> (accessed on 1 March 2019).

⁵¹ Abraham of Kaškar a monk of the Church of the East who lived in the sixth century. He is regarded as the father of the monks in the East. Cf. E. A. W. Budge, *The Book of Governors. The Historia monastica of Thomas Bishop of Marga A.D. 840 I-II* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1894); A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient. A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East I. The Origin of Asceticism. Early Monasticism in Persia*, CSCO 184, Subsidia 14 (Louvain: 1958); S. Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar e la sua Comunità. La Rinascita del Monachesimo Siro-Orientale* (Magnano: Qiqajon, 2005); F. Jullien, *Le Monachisme en Perse. La Réforme d’Abraham le Grand, Père des Moines de l’Orient*, CSCO 622, Subsidia 121 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 2008).

⁵² A. Camplani, “The Revival of Persian Monasticism: Church Structures, Theological Academy and Reformed Monks,” in A. Camplani and G. Filoramo (eds.), *Foundations of Power and Conflicts of Authority in Late Antique Monasticism* (Louvain, 2007), 277–297; Sabino Chialà, “Abraham de Kashkar et ses Règles Monastiques.” *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 58 (2008): 248–262.

Expansion of the Church of the East

The Church of the East had been expanding in different places in the territory of the Persian empire since its early history. For example, the *Chronicle of Arbela* describes the presence of the Christian community during the third century by saying: “The church has more than twenty bishops: in Beth Zabday, Karkha of Beth Slukh, Kaškar, Beth Laphat, Hurmiz-ardashīr, Prat Mayšan, Hanaita, Harbat-Gala, Arzūn, Beth Hezzi, Beth Dailmami, Sinjar, and in yet other cities. Nisibis and the royal Cities did not yet have bishops, for the fear of the pagans.”⁵³ Meanwhile, Bardaisan, writing in 196, speaks about Christians in Parthia, Kušan, Persia, Media, Edessa, Ḥaṭrā, and Fars, among other places.⁵⁴ However, the ecclesiastical organization of the Church of the East in the Sasanian period and its geographical distribution is known mainly through the records of synods assembled by the patriarchs between the fifth and the eighth centuries. The acts of these synods record the names of the bishops who were either present at these synods, or who were represented by delegations and representatives. The acts of the Synod of Marī Isaac (410), lists the following ecclesiastical provinces, which reflect the geographic distribution of the Church of the East in the fourth and early fifth century: Seleucia Ctesiphon had a great metropolitan and four dioceses; Beth Lapat had a metropolitan and dioceses; Nisibis had a metropolitan and six dioceses; Prat Maišan had a metropolitan and three dioceses; Ḥidyāb had a metropolitan and six dioceses; Karkha of Beth Slukh had a metropolitan and five dioceses. At that time there were ten dioceses without a metropolitan: Riv-Ardashīr, Qatar, Arday, Todurū, Mašmahīg, the Islands, Abrashhr, Ḥalwān, Ray, and Garitīn.⁵⁵

In the sixth and seventh centuries, the Church of the East grew and expanded to include bishoprics in central Asia, China, and India. A general geographic distribution of the ecclesiastic provinces based

⁵³ *Chronicle of Arbela*, 30.

⁵⁴ Cureton, “Bardesan-The Book of the Laws of Countries,” 32–33.

⁵⁵ Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 37–49.

on the records of the synods, would allow us to list the following provinces:⁵⁶

- Province of the patriarch, which includes most of the territory of Beth Aramayē in modern central Iraq.
- Province of Khuzestan (Ahwāz in modern Iran), whose metropolitan ranked second after that of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. This ecclesiastical province was centered around the city of Beth Lapat.
- Province of Nisibis in Upper Mesopotamia, which included cities and territories situated near the border with the Byzantines.
- Province of Maišan, which is in southern Mesopotamia (the south of modern Iraq); the metropolitan of this province was responsible for three dioceses.
- Province of Adiabene, centered around the city of Irbil in the north of modern Iraq. This ecclesiastical province included six dioceses.
- Province of Beth Garmay, the modern Kirkuk was the center of this province.
- Province of Fars and east Arabia, which included around eleven dioceses by the end of the Sasanian period. The center of this province was the city of Riv-Ardashīr in Fars.
- Province of Khurasan and Sistan in present day eastern Iran. The East Syriac diocese of Nishapur evidently existed by the beginning of the fifth century.

⁵⁶ Synod of Isaac 410; Synod of Yahballahā I 420; Synod of Dadīšū‘ 424; Synod of Acacius 486; Synod of Babay II 497; Synod of Marī Abā I 544; Synod of Joseph 554; Synod of Ezekiel 576; Synod of Išū‘yhab I 585; Synod of Sabrišū‘ 596. Cf. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale On Recueil Synodes Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902); Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 38–44.

- Media in modern northwest Iran. Bishops of Beth Madaye were present at most of the synods held between 486 and 605.
- Rai and Tabaristan in modern northern Iran. The diocese of Rai or Beth Raziqaye is first mentioned in 410.
- Adarbaigan and Gilān, which is an Iranian province at the southwestern coast of the Caspian Sea. Bishops of the diocese of Adarbaigan (modern Azerbaijan) were present at most of the synods between 486 and 605.

Furthermore, the Church of the East also expanded geographically beyond the Sasanian empire. Missionaries belonging to the Church of the East were active in Central Asia. However, their most important presence was among the Saint Thomas Christians of the Malabar Coast in India.

The vacancy in the patriarchate and struggles with Jacobites

In 604 the Persians invaded the Roman territories. Jerusalem, Alexandria, Damascus, and Antioch were captured, and the Sasanians advanced as far as Chalcedon, at the edge of Constantinople. During the campaign of 604 Catholicos Sabrīšū‘ accompanied the Persian Shah; however, Sabrīšū‘ remained behind at Nisibis, where he died shortly thereafter. Khosrow II and the bishops nominated Gregory of Kaškar to the patriarchate. However, through the influence of the Christian queen Šīrīn⁵⁷ and the court physician Gabriel of Sinjar, Gregory of Prat (605–608), was elevated as the new catholicos. Gabriel of Sinjar, however, was excommunicated by Gregory of Kaškar on charges of bigamy, upon which Gabriel joined the Jacobites (Miaphysite Syriac Orthodox), probably more for political reasons than for theological reasons. Gabriel had cured Šīrīn’s barrenness and so was able to win her support for his plans to impede Gregory of Kaškar. After the death of Patriarch Gregory of Prat, Khosrow II

⁵⁷ Šīrīn was a Christian and a wife of King Khosrow II; after recovering his throne in 591, Khosrow made his wife Šīrīn a queen. Šīrīn used her influence to support the Christians in Persia. Initially she belonged to the Church of the East, but later she joined the Jacobites. She died in 628.

forbade the bishops from electing a new patriarch to the see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and the office of catholicos remained vacant from 608 to 628. During this period Babay the Great (551–628) and Archdeacon Abā of Seleucia led the Church of the East. Babay the Great was one of the most outstanding theological figures of the Church of the East during the early years of the seventh century. He was born in Beth Zabday and studied medicine and theology at Nisibis. He then joined the monastic life in the Great Monastery at Mount Izlā. Babay was an administrator of the catholicate and visited the monasteries. After the murder of King Khosrow II in 628, Babay was promptly elected catholicos, but he declined the position. Soon afterwards, he died in a cell of his monastery on Mount Izlā.⁵⁸

Among the centers that did not adopt the Nestorian faith was the town of Tikrīt, which became a stronghold of Jacobite activity in the region. After Jacob Baradaeus had organized and revived the Jacobite Church in the late sixth century, he created the office of “metropolitan of the East” for Bishop Aḥudemeh, who was executed by the Sasanians in 575. During this period, the Jacobites were subject to persecution from the Sasanians, because of their ties with a spiritual head residing in Byzantine territory. During the second half of the sixth century, the Persians in their wars against the Byzantines deported many Christians who followed the Miaphysite faith to Persia from the Roman territory which they conquered. The deported captives increased the number of Miaphysites within Persia. During that time, the Miaphysites in Persia were under the authority of the Syriac Miaphysite metropolitan of the East until 624, when the seat was vacant for five years. After the end of the Persian-Byzantine war in 628, the Syriac non-Chalcedonian Patriarch Athanasius I Gammolō (595–631) appointed Maruthā of Tikrīt as the first maphrian,⁵⁹ with the task of administrating the Miaphysites in the Sasanian Empire from his base of operation in Tikrīt. The efforts of Maruthā of Tikrīt were successful due to the assistance of Gabriel of Sinjar, the

⁵⁸ Cf. Baum, *The Church of the East*, 37–41.

⁵⁹ The prelate who holds the second rank after the patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church.

physician of King Khosrow II, who was supported strongly by Queen Šīrīn. Maruthā was able to rebuild many churches and monasteries and to preach among the Arab tribes who were living between Euphrates and Tigris.

The Church of the East before the advent of Islam

The Church of the East remained a minority in Persia, but it was active. The pressure from the occasional persecutions caused the Church to expand its missionary activity to Central Asia, China and India and among the Arabs in Mesopotamia and Arabia. In what follows, I hope to shed light on some aspects on the activities and organization of the Church of the East among the Arabs before Islam, which later became the reality with which Patriarch Iṣū'yahb III had to deal.

Based on historical Nestorian sources, it seems that Christianity had already been established in different places in East Arabia before the fifth century.⁶⁰ The *Patriarchs of the Church of the East* mentions that "Saint Mārī was the first evangelist who spread Christianity in some parts of Arabia and the Persian Sea."⁶¹ Around the fourth century there was a monk named 'Abdīšū' who travelled to certain areas in eastern Arabia and established a monastery on one of its islands.⁶² In the fifth century there were already well-established Nestorian bishoprics distributed on the islands and coasts of the Arabian Gulf, which were organized within two dioceses: Beth Qaṭrayē and Beth Mazūnayē (Mazūn). These two ecclesiastical territories were supervised by the Nestorian metropolitan of Fars, who also was under the command of the Nestorian patriarch. The influence of Fars on Mazūn and Beth Qaṭrayē took administrative, theological, and liturgical forms. For example, Ma'nā, who was the metropolitan of Fars at the beginning of the sixth century, translated theological books of the Nestorian fathers and composed church hymns and

⁶⁰ Cf. Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 1, Part 2 (Harvard University Press, 1995), 177–182.

⁶¹ *Patriarchs of the Church of the East*, 2 and 4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 26; also *Chronicle of Seert*, II, 310–312.

sermons; he sent his works to be used in the Nestorian churches in Bahrain and India.⁶³

The acts of the Nestorian Synods (which were convoked to resolve problems within the Nestorian church) are extremely important historical sources. These sources shed light on the life of the Christian Nestorian communities in the area, from which we learn about the economic, social, cultural, and religious life of the population of this land. In the acts of the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410, there is a mention of the ecclesiastic territory of “the islands,” which is an expression associated usually with the eastern part of the Arabian Gulf region. In this Synod, a bishop named Paul was appointed to the islands of Arday (Dayrīn) and Tudurū by the great metropolitan.⁶⁴ The acts also mention an excommunicated bishop by the name of Baṭay of Mašmahīg. Another person by the name of Daniel, who was made bishop by Baṭay of Mašmahīg, was also excommunicated. There were still others who unlawfully proclaimed themselves bishops and who were also excommunicated. Eliyyā bishop of Mašmahīg was among the bishops who signed the Synod’s acts.⁶⁵

The acts of the 420 Synod of Marī Yahballahā reflect the ecclesiastical schisms and divisions that necessitated the convoking of the previous Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410) as well as that of Marī Yahballahā (420). The goal of these synods was to support the authority of the catholicos as the head of the Church of the East, and, at the same time, to establish a lawful way for conducting church affairs and appointing bishops and church leaders.⁶⁶ These were problems that continued to disturb the Church of the East during the Synod of Dadīšū‘ (424). Among the ecclesiastics who rebelled against the authority of the catholicos was Baṭay from Hurmizd Ardashīr in Persia; he is probably the same individual as Baṭay the bishop of Mašmahīg. The rebels sought the support of the local imperial gov-

⁶³ Ibid., III, 117.

⁶⁴ Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 273.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 274.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 276–284.

ernors. This Synod mentioned Yūḥanūn bishop of Mazūn.⁶⁷ During the Synod of Marī Babay (497), Yazdad, bishop of Riv-Ardashīr and the metropolitan of Fars, was mentioned as rebelling against the catholicos, who tried many times to summon Yazdad, but without response. There are warnings of excommunications against other rebellious bishops who were seeking independence from the leadership of the catholicos. This crisis began seven years before the convocation of the synod, that is, around 490.⁶⁸

Later, an anti-catholicos named Elišaʿ (524–537) appointed bishops and metropolitans for Fars, Ahwāz, and Bahrain, and deposed those who resisted him.⁶⁹ At the Synod of Marī Abā (544), there is an emphasis on the locations that are situated near the Kingdom of Persia. An ecclesiastical problem occurred in Riv-Ardashīr when someone appointed himself a bishop. Other rebels against the authority of the catholicos sought the support of the governors. David, bishop of Mazūn, is among them.⁷⁰ In the Synod of Marī Ezekiel (576), the following bishops of different locations in the Arabian Gulf region were mentioned: Šmūyīl bishop of Mazūn, Marī Sargīs bishop of Mašmahīg, Marī Isaac bishop of Hagar and Fīt-Ardashīr (Fīrūz-Ardashīr), the priest Šemʿūn, and the deacon Sargīs.⁷¹ During the rule of Khosrow I Anushirwan, Ezekiel, the bishop of Zāb in the north of Iraq, was commissioned by the king to bring him pearls from Bahrain.⁷² The same Persian king supported the elevation of Ezekiel to the catholicosate from 567 to 581. According to the *Chronicle of Seert*, Catholicos Ezekiel was “respected and honored by the Persian king Khosrow I Anushirwan, who had earlier sent him to Bahrain and Yamama to bring back pearls.”⁷³ During the Synod of Marī Išūʿyhab I in 585, Metropolitan Gregory of Riv-Ardashīr and

⁶⁷ Ibid., 285.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 314–317.

⁶⁹ *Chronicle of Seert*, III, 150.

⁷⁰ Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 328.

⁷¹ Ibid., 368 and 387.

⁷² *Chronicle of Seert*, III, 192.

⁷³ *Chronicle of Seert*, II, 100.

Faris, along with his bishops, did not attend.⁷⁴ In 585, Patriarch Iṣū‘yhab I sent a letter to Ya‘qūb bishop of Daray⁷⁵ (585 A.D) which was the seat of a bishopric. In this letter, some social customs and habits are mentioned, such as visiting monasteries and churches in the countryside. The subject of the pearl fishing and fishermen and their activities during Sunday worship was also brought up in the letter.⁷⁶

Another center of Christianity among the Arabs was the city of Ḥīrā, which was situated near the Arabian Desert. During the sixth and early seventh centuries, Ḥīrā became a flourishing city and its population was a mixture of Aramaeans and Arabs from the tribes of Tamīm, Tanūkh, Ghassān, and Lakhm. Christianity established itself strongly in the city after the conversion to Christianity of al-Nu‘mān III b. al-Mundhir, the last Lakhmid king of al-Ḥīrā (582–602). At first, he was supported by the Sasanian king Khosrow II, although Khosrow later killed Al-Nu‘mān due to a conflict that had arisen between them. The Arab Christians in Ḥīrā were known for building churches and monasteries. In his brief article dedicated to Christianity in Ḥīrā, Boulos A. Ayad mentions that before Islam, most of the rulers of al-Ḥīrā were faithful to their new religion (Christianity) and began to build churches and monasteries in al-Ḥīrā. Ayad lists several churches and monasteries located in Ḥīrā prior to the advent of Islam, such as a church related to members of the tribe of Azd, named the Church of Banī Māzen; the church of Banī ‘Adī; the church of al-Baghwtah which was considered to be one of the seven centers for Arab worship by the classical Arab writer al-Ḥamadānī; and the church of the Monastery of al-Lūġ which was related to al-Ḥīrā. In addition, an inscription was found in a monastery in Ḥīrā stating that it dates to around the mid-sixth century and was constructed by Hind, “the Christian queen of Ḥīrā.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 390–424.

⁷⁵ The same island as Dayrīn or Ardaī in modern Bahrain.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 448. See also *Chronicle of Seert*, IV, 439.

⁷⁷ Boulos A. Ayad, “The Spread of Christianity before Islam in the Arabian Peninsula with Archaeological Evidence from the Province of Al-Hira,”

From all of the above, we learn that the Church of the East was well represented in what today is Iraq and Iran and expanded to the east and south. It spread among the Arabs in Mesopotamia due to the activity of missionaries and was well established in eastern Arabia. However, there were also issues and schisms that disturbed the unity of the Church of the East. These schisms would come to be among the main concerns faced by the future patriarch Iṣū'yahb III (649–659), who struggled to maintain the unity of his church.

The Church of the East and the peace between Rome and Persia after the murder of Khosrow II

The Byzantine emperor Heraclius (610–641) reorganized the Roman Empire and strengthened the eastern provinces, which finally led him to launch a remarkable campaign against the Sasanians (622–628). The military successes of Emperor Heraclius shook the Sasanian Empire and resulted in a revolt against Khosrow II. In 628 Khosrow was murdered in a plot involving his son Sheroe. The efforts of the Sasanians to achieve political stability after the murder of Khosrow failed because of rapid changes in the imperial leadership: in less than four years, five shahs and two queens followed one another in quick succession.⁷⁸

After the death of Khosrow II, a new patriarch for the Church of the East, Iṣū'yahb II of Gdalā (628–646), was selected.⁷⁹ After his election as a patriarch, Iṣū'yahb began reorganizing the Church of the East, placing special emphasis on theological education. Many schools were reopened or newly founded. In his opinion, the only thing beyond appropriate education that could be persuasive in the

Coptic Church Review 12, no. 4 (December 1991): 116–120; Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 1, Part 2, 696–697.

⁷⁸ Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasaian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

⁷⁹ Louis R Sako, *Lettre Christologique du Patriarche Syro-Oriental Iṣō'yahb II de Gdālā (628–646): Étude, Traduction et Édition Critique* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1983).

debates with the Miaphysites was an episcopacy with moral integrity. In this way, Iṣū'yahb tried to gain the favor of the state authorities. Queen Bōrān wanted to calm the situation in the Persian Empire with a definitive peace treaty, and in 630 she sent an official diplomatic delegation to Emperor Heraclius to discuss peace. This delegation consisted of the highest dignitaries of the Church of the East under the leadership of Catholicos Iṣū'yahb II. The delegation, which included the metropolitans of Nisibis, Beth Garmay, Adiabene, and Gustra, and the bishops of Maḥūze, Damascus, and Nineveh, met the Byzantine emperor in Aleppo, where Iṣū'yahb II celebrated the East Syriac liturgy and the emperor himself received communion from the hand of the catholicos. The diplomatic mission was also crowned with political success and brought the region a few more years of peace. At this time, the expansion of East Syriac Christianity reached China (in 635) and additional metropolitanates were subsequently founded by Iṣū'yahb II at places such as at Ḥulwān (Iran), Herat (Afghanistan), Samarkand (Uzbekistan), China, and eventually also in India. Christians of India had already been mentioned by Cosmas Indicopleustes⁸⁰ and had been under the influence of the Church of the East since at least the end of the third century.⁸¹

The conquest of Persia⁸²

Patriarch Iṣū'yahb III (649–659) had to deal not only with schisms and rebellions within his church but also with the arrival of the Muslim Arabs whose coming fundamentally changed the situation.

⁸⁰ Cosmas Indicopleustes (died 550) was a Greek traveler and geographer from Alexandria, Egypt during the first half of the sixth century. See, Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk*, edition and translation by J. W. McCrindle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁸¹ Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 37–60

⁸² Frederic P. Miller, Agnes F. Vandome, and John McBrewster, *Muslim Conquest of Persia* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Publishing, 2009). Also, Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*.

In 632 Yazdegard III (632–651) was elevated to the throne of Persia after almost four years of political instability. In 633 Khālid b. al-Walīd led the Arab Muslim forces into Sasanian territory where he defeated a Persian army on the border with Iraq. The Muslim Arabs defeated another Persian army which was sent against them from the capital, Ctesiphon near the harbor of Ubullā. Then, the Arabs launched an attack against Hīrā, which was the main Sasanian stronghold west of the Euphrates. The Sasanian army was defeated near the city and the population surrendered and paid tribute. Under the caliphate of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (634–644), the Muslim forces succeeded in conquering Iraq. The Muslim Arabs defeated the newly appointed commander-in-chief (previously the governor of Khurasan) Rustam ibn Farrukhzad in the Battle of al-Qādisīyyah (636). When the Arab forces approached the capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Yazdegard III fled with his relatives, and the city surrendered without resistance in 637.

In April 637, the Muslim Arab forces marched northwest and conquered Tikrīt, Nineveh, and Irbil. Then the Muslim Arabs marched toward Khuzestan, where the military commander Hormozan organized an active defense but was driven out in 639 by forces from Basra and Kūfa. Shushtar fell into the hands of the Muslims in 642 with the help of a Persian who had arranged to open the gates in return for his own security. Afterward, Sūs and Jundishapur were besieged and fell, and Muslim forces entered the southern Jebāl.⁸³ By 642 Yazdegard had raised a major army in the Jebāl and sent it to Nahawand to block any Muslim advance from that direction and possibly to retake Iraq. The battle fought at Nahawand in the summer of 642 lasted several days, and resulted in heavy casualties on both sides, with the Muslim Arabs victorious in the end. The Muslim victory at Nahawand was a second military disaster for the Sasanians; it secured Iraq and Khuzestan for the Muslims, ended any concerted resistance

⁸³ Jebāl is a region in western Iran.

in the Jebāl, and opened the Iranian plateau to the Muslims. Yazdegard fled to Isfahan and then to Estakhr.⁸⁴

The other main push of the Arab Muslim forces after Nahawand was south-eastward from Khuzestan into Fars. The Muslim Arab forces coming from the west invaded Fars, supporting another Muslim army which had crossed from Bahrain. The Persians were defeated, and the governor of Fars was killed near Rishahr, while tribute was imposed on most of the major urban centers. After the death of ʿUmar in 644, many places in Azerbaijan, the Jebāl, and Fars rebelled against the Muslim Arabs, but they crushed the rebellions and imposed a new tribute on some cities, while other urban centers were destroyed. Muslim garrisons and mosques were established in new settlements in reconquered areas. Yazdegard tried to organize a resistance in the province of Fars, where tribute was withheld after the death of ʿUmar. However, by the year 650, the Persian resistance in Fars had been crushed.

After the fall of Fars, Yazdegard fled to Kermān and from there to Sistan and finally towards Merv.⁸⁵ In 652 most of Sistan and Kermān provinces fell into the hands of the Muslim Arabs. Yazdegard III escaped to Merv in Khurasan because it was ruled by a marzaban (governor) named Mahoe, who was personally indebted to Yazdegard for his ascent to a high office. The king apparently hoped to raise a new army in Khurasan with the aid of the Turks and the Chinese. In Khurasan, Yazdegard was accompanied by only a small military force, when issues arose between him and his vassal Mahoe. Having no troops at his disposal, he secretly abandoned his residence and took flight, hiding in a mill on the River Murghab with a Christian miller; there he was killed by the miller himself. The funeral was organized by Merv's Christian community, who buried him in the

⁸⁴ Estakhr is a city and a district in the province of Fars in South East Iran. Estakhr served as an administrative and religious center under the Sasanian Empire.

⁸⁵ M. A. Shaban, "Khurāsān at the Time of the Arab Conquest," in *Iran and Islam*, ed., by C. E. Bosworth (Edinburgh: University Press, 1971), 479–490.

garden of the metropolitan of Merv. Yazdegard's death in 651 finally brought an end to the Sasanian Empire.

With the Muslims being preoccupied with their first civil war (656–659), most of Iran slipped temporarily out of their control. However, the Muslim Arabs soon crushed the rebels in Iran and Fars, and Kermān and Khurasan were pacified.⁸⁶

Table No. 1: Arab Muslim conquest timeline

March 633	Khālid b. al-Walīd marched north through eastern Arabia toward southern Iraq.
April 633	The Battle of the Chain near Ubullā, southern Iraq. The Muslim army under the command of Khālid defeated the Sasanian frontier forces.
May 633	The battle of Walaja. The Muslims again defeated the Persian forces.
May 633	The battle of Ullays. The Muslims again defeated the Persian forces.
End of May	The fall of Ḥīrā into the hands of Muslim Arabs
November 633	Khālid defeated the Persians and their allies the Arabs of Taghlib and Nimer at 'Ayn al-Tamr, south of the Euphrates.
Spring 634	Khālid left for Syria after having placed al-Muṭannā in charge of Ḥīrā
November 634	Battle of the Bridge: Persian forces ambushed Arab forces under the command of Abū 'Ubayd from the opposite bank of the Euphrates. The Persians inflicted a disastrous defeat on the Arab forces.

⁸⁶ This section is based on M. Morony, "Arab ii. Arab Conquest of Iran," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, II/2, pp. 203–210. For further reading see Elton Daniel, *The History of Iran* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press: 2001); Fred Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: University Press, 1981); and Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

April 635	Battle of Buwayb. The Muslim Arabs defeated the Persian forces.
November 636	Battle of al-Qādisiyyah. The Persians were defeated. The battle of Qādisiyyah was a decisive victory for the Arabs and a military disaster for the Persians.
March 637	The Muslim Arabs capture the city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon
March 637	Siege of Jalūlā which lasted about seven months
May/June 637	Tikrīt falls into the hands of the Muslim Arabs
May/June 637	Nineveh falls into the hands of the Muslim Arabs
November 637	Arab forces capture Jalūlā
639	An active Persian defense in Khuzestan and attack in Maysan, that was however defeated by Arab forces from Basra and Kufa
Summer 642	Battle of Nahawand. The Arab forces defeated the Persians. This was the second military disaster for the Sasanians and secured Iraq and Khuzestan for the Muslim Arabs. It ended any concerted resistance in the Jebāl, and opened the Iranian plateau to the Arabs.
644	The Muslim Arabs invaded Fars
644	After the death of ‘Umar, many places in Azerbaijan, the Jebāl, and Fars rebelled against the Muslim Arabs, but the rebellions were crushed.
650	Yazdegard tried to organize a resistance in the province of Fars, where tribute was withheld after the death of ‘Umar. However, the Persian resistance in Fars was crushed.
651	In Merv, Yazdegard hid himself in a mill on the River Murghab where he was killed by the miller himself. Yazdegard’s death brought an end to the Sasanian Empire.

CHAPTER TWO.

IŠŪ‘YAHB III: HIS LIFE, CAREER AND LETTERS

THE LIFE OF IŠŪ‘YAHB III

Patriarch Išū‘yahb III (649–659) was the son of a wealthy Persian man named Bastomag from the village of Quplāna, located in the province of Ḥidyāb in north of today’s Iraq. In his important study on Išū‘yahb (which is a major source for the following chapter), J. Maurice Fiey proposed the date of his birth to be around 580. His father owned lands that extended about 100 km north of his village. Išū‘yahb studied in the famous school of Nisibis at an early age under the direction of Ḥanāna of Ḥidyāb, who was appointed director of the school in 572. According to Mārī ibn Sulaymān there were 800 students in the school of Nisibis under the direction of Ḥanāna, while the *Chronicle of Seert* puts the number of students at 300. However, according to the abridged corpus of eastern and western canons that was found in the library of Seert, there were 500 students in the school of Nisibis. Barḥadbšabā did not report the number of students, but mentions that the fame of Ḥanāna was widespread in all the schools in the East. However, in his writings Ḥanāna departed from the official doctrinal consensus of the Church of the East and

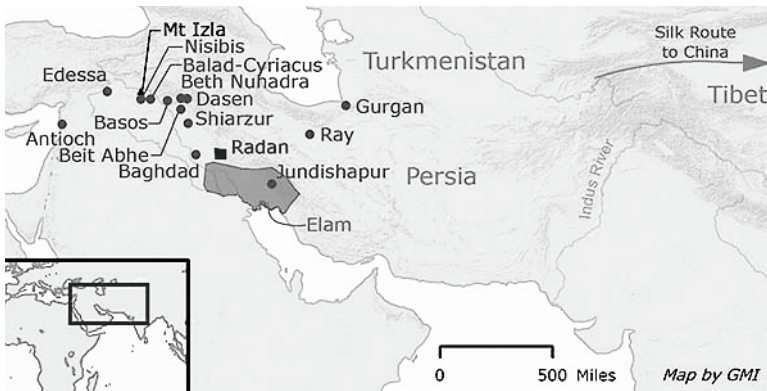
attacked the authority of Theodore of Mopsuestia, favoring instead the writings of John Chrysostom.¹

Ḥanāna's teaching and method of interpretation created a controversy in the Church of the East, particularly in Nisibis and its school. Gregory of Kaškar, the metropolitan of Nisibis, opposed Ḥanāna and asked the patriarch to excommunicate him together with some nobles from the city of Nisibis who supported Ḥanāna. However, Patriarch Sabrišū' supported Ḥanāna and, because of Gregory's harsh conduct in punishing his opponents that included nobles from Nisibis, he was deposed from his see. He left the city by order of Khosrow II and returned to Kaškar. Išū'yahb, with 300 other students, abandoned the school of Nisibis in solidarity with Gregory of Kaškar. Some of the students who left the city of Nisibis went to the Monastery of Marī Abraham on Mount Izlā, while other students joined a school that was founded near the city of Balad by its Bishop Mark. Išū'yahb returned to his homeland instead and decided to join the religious life by becoming a monk. At that period, a monk named Jacob came from the Monastery of Marī Abraham in Mount Izlā and founded a monastery in a place called Beth 'Ābē, which was not far from the birthplace of Išū'yahb.² Bastomag was a friend of Monk Jacob, and would often visit the monastery for blessings with his son Išū'yahb. It was then that Išū'yahb decided to become a monk.³ In this monastery, each monk lived in a separate cell but acknowledged the rule of an abbot and worshiped with his fellow monks in a common chapel.

¹ Cf. Jean-Maurice Fiey, "Išō'yaw le Grand. Vie du Catholicos Nestorien Išō'yaw III d'Adiabène (580–659)," In *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 35 (1969): 308–315. Also see Baum, *The Church of the East*, 35–36.

² The Monastery of Beth 'Ābē is located near the Great Zāb about 50 miles north of Mosul. The monastery played important role in the history of the Syriac monasticism in Persia and was inhabited by important figures in the Church of the East. Cf. P. Brock Sebastian et al. (eds.), *The Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 70.

³ Fiey, "Iso'yaw le Grand," (1969), 315.



Map No. 1: Key locations in the life of Išū‘yahb such as the Monastery of Beth ‘Ābē, Mount Izlā, Nisibis and Šahrazūr

After the victory of the Byzantines and the murder of Khosrow II in 628, his son Kavad II Sheroe was elevated to the Sasanid throne. In this same year, the Nestorians were permitted to elect a patriarch, and the choice fell upon Išū‘yahb II of Gdalā, the bishop of Balad and a former student in the school of Nisibis. Išū‘yahb II was elevated to the patriarchal throne after an almost 20 year vacancy. Patriarch Išū‘yahb II (628–646) knew Išū‘yahb of Ḥidyāb since both had been students in the same school of Nisibis and among the 300 students who abandoned the city in solidarity with Metropolitan Gregory of Kaškar.⁴ While he was living in the Monastery of Beth ‘Ābē, Išū‘yahb was chosen as bishop of Nineveh, and his episcopal ordination took place in 628/629. The first major task for the newly elected bishop was to join a delegation together with his patriarch and other bishops: Cyriacus metropolitan of Nisibis, Paul metropolitan of Ḥidyāb, Gabriel metropolitan of Beth Garmay and Sahdūnā bishop of Maḥūzē d-Aryūn. The delegation was sponsored by the Persian queen Bōrān and its purpose was to meet the Byzantine emperor Heraclius for the sake of peace between the two empires. The delegation met Heracles in Aleppo where they celebrated the holy mass together. Thomas of Margā mentions that while he was in Antioch,

⁴ Ibid., 324.

Bishop Iṣū'yahb of Nineveh stole a casket which contained the reliquaries of saints from a famous church in Antioch and brought it with him to the Monastery of Beth 'Ābē.⁵ In 640 Iṣū'yahb became metropolitan of Ḥidyāb and, after the death of Patriarch Maremmeh in 649, he was elected patriarch of all the Church of the East. He resided in the city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon until his death in the Monastery of Beth 'Ābē in 659.⁶

Iṣū'yahb was an active person; he spent most of his life dealing with various challenges. His chief enemies were the Jacobites who had a strong presence in Nineveh. During the first year of his bishopric, the Jacobite church in Persia was reorganized into a large metropolitanate or mafriante, whose center was Tikrīt. This reorganization came after the defeat of the Persians by the Romans and after the murder of Khosrow II in 628. The Jacobites lost their favorable position with the Persians and found themselves in a difficult situation. The Nestorians resumed their activities after years of marginalization and consecrated a new catholicos. Faced with these events, that is, the recovery of the Nestorians on one hand and the weakness of the Jacobites on the other, the Jacobite patriarch Athanasius I (595–631) tried to strengthen his community by founding a strong institutional church in this territory. The patriarch's decision to reorganize and establish the institution of the mafriante in Persia occurred after his community had lost its demographic weight under Persian rule. During the reign of Khosrow II it had included churches in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

After the Byzantines recovered their territories, the Jacobite community in Persia became small again in comparison to the Nestorian church. In 629, the Jacobite church was organized into ten dioceses with a mafrian as a leader. He resided in Tikrīt. The Jacobites spent great energy to establish and extend their activities into different regions, especially Nineveh, which alarmed Bishop Iṣū'yahb. It is important to note that the heart of the Jacobite pres-

⁵ William Wright, *A Short History of Syriac Literature* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1894), 171–174.

⁶ Fiey, "Iso'yaw le Grand," (1970), 5–46.

ence and the center of their power were located in two major places: the Monastery of Maṛi Mattā on Mount Alfāf near modern day Mosul, and the town of Tikrīt. Išū'yahb tried to stop the Jacobite activities in Nineveh with all means available. He succeeded in stopping a plan to build a Jacobite church in Nineveh. According to Bar Hebraeus, this occurred only because Išū'yahb distributed large amounts of money to the Muslim Arab authorities.



Map No. 2: The location of Tikrīt, Mosul (Nineveh), and Irbil (Ḥidyāb)



Figure 1: Mount Alfāf and the Monastery of Marī Mattā located about 15 miles east of Mosul

Another major problem that Iṣū'yahb had to deal with was the teachings of Sahdūnā (Martyrius), the Nestorian bishop of Maḥūzē d-Aryūn. Sahdūnā was Iṣū'yahb's fellow monk in the same Monastery of Beth 'Ābē and it was the same Iṣū'yahb who supported Sahdūnā to the bishopric of Maḥūzē d-Aryūn. Bishop Sahdūnā and Iṣū'yahb were in the same delegation that met Emperor Heraclius.

In the city of Edessa, Sahdūnā met an old Jacobite monk. After a long discussion, Sahdūnā changed his Christological thinking toward a Jacobite or Chalcedonian belief: he emphasized that Jesus Christ had only one Eqnūmā/hypostasis after his Incarnation.⁷ The

⁷ Wright, *A Short History of Syriac Literature*, 171.

formal Christological doctrine of his church was that Christ had two natures and two hypostases after his Incarnation.⁸

Another great challenge that Išū'yahb faced was the attempt at an ecclesiastical schism, led by Metropolitan Šem'un of Fars,⁹ who had under his jurisdiction East Arabia, Mazūn, Mikrān,¹⁰ Kirmān,¹¹ and India. After his elevation to the patriarchal throne, Išū'yahb III wrote to Šem'un, expressing his disappointment at his conduct in managing his ecclesiastical province. Šem'un with his bishops, including those of East Arabia, rebelled against the patriarchate and declared their ecclesiastical independence from Seleucia-Ctesiphon, seeking support from the Arab rulers. Išū'yahb sent two delegations of bishops: one delegation to Fars and another to Beth Qaṭrayē.¹² Neither delegation was welcomed; Išū'yahb summoned a synod of bishops and sent a collection of letters threatening the rebellious bishops with excommunication.

⁸ Cf. Dietmar W. Winkler, "Die Christologie des Ostsyrischen Katholikos Išhō'yahb III., von Adiabene (580–659)," *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001): 516–526.

⁹ Fars was a Sasanian province which closely corresponds to the present-day province of Fars in southeast Iran. Fars was divided into several districts: Ardashīr-Khwarrah, Estakhr which served as an administrative and religious center under the Sasanian Empire, Darabgerd, Shapur-Khwarrah, and Arrajan which was a late administrative division founded in the early 6th century by Kavad I (498–531), who settled prisoners of war from Amid and Martyropolis in the place. Most of the inhabitants of Fars were Zoroastrians. However, a large Christian community also lived in Fars, due to the large deportation of inhabitants from the Roman Empire by Shapur I to the province.

¹⁰ Mikrān is a semi-desert coastal strip in Baluchistan in Pakistan and Iran, along the coast of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.

¹¹ Kirmān corresponded to the present-day province of Kerman in southeast Iran. The province bordered Fars in the west and Mazūn in the south.

¹² The eastern coast of Arabia, including the islands in the Persian Gulf.

Yet another great challenge that Iṣū'yahb had to deal with was the apostasy of Christians in Mazūn.¹³ Through Iṣū'yahb's letters we are informed that the Muslim Arabs demanded Christians in Mazūn to hand over a "portion" of their possessions in order to preserve their Christian faith. These Christians, however, abandoned their faith and kept their property. Patriarch Iṣū'yahb expressed his great sadness upon hearing this news; this remained a matter of deep concern to the patriarch.¹⁴

THE WRITINGS OF IṢŪ'YAHB

A - In his index, 'Abdiṣū' al-Ṣūbāwī mentions that Iṣū'yahb III wrote a book called the *Book of Refuting the Opinions* and another book called *Book of Advice for the Beginners*. The *Book of Refuting the Opinions* was written upon the request of John, metropolitan of Beth Laphat,¹⁵ for a work against the heretics, especially against the followers of Ḥanāna of Ḥidyāb. This book was mentioned in some of Iṣū'yahb's letters, but it has not survived.¹⁶

B - The *Life of Iṣū'sabrān the Martyr*: This hagiographical narrative has survived in a single ninth-century manuscript in the Vatican Library, Ms. Syr. 161. The narrative is found between folios 190 and 216 of the manuscript. The author says in the introduction that he wrote the biography according to what he had heard from a friend of the martyr Iṣū'sabrān, also named Iṣū'sabrān. The summary of the story goes as follows. Iṣū'sabrān was converted from Zoroastrianism to Christianity, and because of that he was imprisoned in Irbil for 15

¹³ Mazūn or Makā was a satrapy (province) of the Achaemenid Empire and later a satrapy of the Parthian and Sasanian empires, corresponding to modern day United Arab Emirates and the northern half of Oman.

¹⁴ See Iṣū'yahb III, *Ep.* 14C. 248.

¹⁵ Beth Laphat, also called Gundishapur, was the chief city in southern province of Khuzestan. Antiochene prisoners of war, deported by Shapūr I from Antioch after the middle of the third century, built Gundishapur as their own residence.

¹⁶ Cf. A. Abuna, *Adāb al-Lughah al-Arāmiyyah*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Mašriq, 1996), 257-258.

years. He was then taken, with twelve other Christians, to the village of Dūrdā (Beth Dūdirī), which is located next to a bridge that separated Beth Garmay from Beth Lašfar. He was crucified in 620 A.D. near that village, during the rule of Khosrow II. Išū‘yahb wrote this story while he was metropolitan in Ḥidyāb; it reveals the high quality of his writing style.¹⁷

C. Rituals: Išū‘yahb of Ḥidyāb was passionately concerned about church rituals, and he sought to arrange and organize them in an attractive form. He composed many liturgical writings and other liturgical works were attributed to him. He organized the ritual of baptism and the consecration of new altars, the ritual for forgiveness of apostates, heretics, and sinners; the ritual of the consecration of holy water, of the renewal of the wine, and of the ordination of deacons, priests and bishops. Išū‘yahb of Ḥidyāb took great efforts in organizing the book of prayers called Ḥūdrā (ܚܘܕܪܐ), meaning “the circle of the year.” According to Thomas of Margā, Išū‘yahb began to organize these ritual books and orders before the middle of the seventh century, and they were sent during his patriarchate to all the provinces of the Church of the East.¹⁸

D. Letters: We are in the possession of 106 of Išū‘yahb’s letters. They have come down to us in a beautiful tenth-century manuscript, preserved in the Vatican Library. These letters are valuable documents that inform us about the history of the Church of the East prior to the Islamic conquest and during the twenty years following this conquest. The letters are divided in three groups according to a chronological order that reflects the three stages of Išū‘yahb’s career: The first group contains 52 letters (*Ep.* 1B–52B) written by Išū‘yahb when he was bishop of Nineveh. The second group contains 32 letters written by Išū‘yahb when he became a metropolitan of Ḥidyāb (*Ep.* 1M–32M). The third group contains 22 letters written after his ascension to the patriarchal office (*Ep.* 1C–22C). Four sheets have been lost

¹⁷ Ibid., 258–259.

¹⁸ Ibid., 259–262.

from the beginning of the manuscript. The letters reflect the personality of Iṣū'yahb as a pastor and a man involved in building a platform of collaboration between the church and the political government of his time.

His letters were mentioned in the thirteenth century catalogue of 'Abdīšū' al-Šūbāwī. Assemani published some of Iṣū'yahb's letters in his *Bibliotheca Orientalis* in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ Some of Iṣū'yahb's letters were also published by Ernest Wallis A. Budge in his *The Book of Governors, Historia Monastica of Thomas bishop of Marga A.D. 840*.²⁰ The complete collection of Iṣū'yahb's letters (106 letters) was published by Rubens Duval ed., *Isbo'yhab Patriarchae, Liber Epistularum*, with a Latin translation.²¹

The letters are written in high quality Syriac and employ imaginative style to describe the various spiritual, social, political, and religious situations. The letters vary in length with the long ones occupying six pages and the short ones only about one page. The letters were written between 630 and 656. They usually begin with an introduction in which Iṣū'yahb addresses the people he is writing to and most of the time he mentions their proper names. Then, Iṣū'yahb states his name and presents himself as a servant of Christ or the Church. Some of the letters, however, were addressed to people whose names are not mentioned. The letters end with a small paragraph that praises the saints and asserts the importance of the power of their prayers. The eschatological aspect is a frequent subject in his letters in which the author describes his belief in the end of the world and the coming of Christ.

¹⁹ Joseph Simonius Assemani, ed., *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana, in qua Manuscriptos Codices Syriacos, Arabicos, Persicos, Turcicos, Hebraicos, Samaritanos, Armenicos, Æthiopicos, Graecos, Ægyptiacos, Ibericos & Malabaricos* (Roma: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719–1728).

²⁰ Ernest Wallis A. Budge, *The Book of Governors, Historia Monastica of Thomas Bishop of Marga A.D. 840* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1894).

²¹ Rubens Duval, *Isbo'yhab Patriarchae, Liber Epistularum*, CSCO., Sy. II 60 (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1904–1905).

The letter “B” refers to the initial letter of “Bishop” which indicates the letters that were written during Išū‘yahb’s bishopric.	<i>Ep.</i> 1B–52B.
The letter “M” refers to the initial letter of “Metropolitanate” which indicates the letters that were written during Išū‘yahb’s metropolitanate.	<i>Ep.</i> 1M–32M.
The letter “C” refers to the initial letter of “Catholicos” which indicates the letters that were written during Išū‘yahb’s catholicosate (patriarchate).	<i>Ep.</i> 1C–22C.

The letters that Išū‘yahb wrote during his episcopate

The historical background of the letters that Išū‘yahb wrote during his episcopate in Nineveh covers the period ranging from the end of the Byzantine-Persian war and the murder of King Khosrow II in February 628, to the Arab conquest of Mesopotamia circa 639. The consequences of these wars, with the memory of destruction and difficulties, are reflected in many of Išū‘yahb’s letters that were written during his bishopric.

However, according to the scholars who have studied Išū‘yahb’s letters, not all the letters attributed to the period of Išū‘yahb’s bishopric according to the Vatican manuscript—published by Rubens Duval—were in fact written during that period. Jean Maurice Fiey, in his study “Išō‘yaw le Grand. Vie du Catholicos Nestorien Išō‘yaw III d’Adiabène (580–659),”²² takes into consideration Duval’s own doubt that not all the letters attributed in the manuscript to Išū‘yahb’s bishopric in fact date back to that era.²³ Fiey proposes that the first ten letters of Išū‘yahb (*Ep.* 1B–10B) were written when Išū‘yahb was still a monk in the Monastery of Beth ‘Ābē.²⁴ The rest of the letters that were classified under the episcopacy of Išū‘yahb, according to Fiey, were written *before* the Arab conquest of the re-

²² Fiey, “Išō‘yaw le Grand,” (1969): 305–333 and (1970): 5–46.

²³ Duval, *Išō‘yahb Patriarchae III Liber Epistularum*, 3.

²⁴ Fiey, “Išō‘yaw le Grand,” (1969): 315–317.

gion of Nineveh. According to Fiey then, there is no mention of the Muslim Arabs in the correspondence of Iṣū'yahb during his bishopric of Nineveh. Meanwhile, according to Fiey, Letter 48B, which clearly mentions the Muslim Arabs, the *Ṭayayē Mhaggrē*, is a misplaced letter that belongs to the period of his metropolitanate at Ḥidyāb. Fiey believes that all we know about the Muslim Arabs through Iṣū'yahb's letters is what he wrote during his metropolitanate and catholicosate. Furthermore, according to Fiey, the struggle against the Jacobites in Nineveh during Iṣū'yahb's bishopric and his dealing with the authorities of his region occurred during the last years of the Sasanian rule and during the few short years when the Byzantine forces occupied northern Mesopotamia after the death of Khosrow II in 628.²⁵

Fiey's doubt regarding the chronology of Iṣū'yahb's letters was based on something that certain Nestorian sources mention: that during the Muslim Arabs' invasion of the Mosul region, the bishop of Nineveh was Maremmeh, who *succeeded* Iṣū'yahb on the episcopal throne of Nineveh around 639 or 640: "Some historians say that the Muslims worked to make him (Maremmeh) catholicos because, when he was bishop of Nineveh at the time of the conquest, he had brought them food during their invasion of the Mosul region."²⁶ Therefore, according to Fiey, anything that Iṣū'yahb wrote about the Arabs must have been written during Iṣū'yahb's metropolitanate at Ḥidyāb and not during his bishopric at Nineveh, because Iṣū'yahb was no longer the bishop of Nineveh at the time of the conquest; he had, in fact, already been appointed metropolitan of Ḥidyāb. Fiey believed that the secular authorities in Nineveh during the period of Iṣū'yahb's bishopric (and mentioned in his letters) must have been the Byzantines, who occupied northern Iraq between 628 and 634.²⁷ Fiey's alternative dating has been followed by many scholars, includ-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 331.

²⁶ *Chronicle of Seert*, II/2, 309–310.

²⁷ Fiey, "Iṣō'yaw le Grand," (1969): 327–328.

ing William Young,²⁸ Robert Hoyland,²⁹ and Ovidio Ioan.³⁰ His analysis has made these and other scholars disregard letters *Ep.* 39B, 43B, 44B, 46B, and 48B and treat them as irrelevant for understanding the Muslim Arabs.

My intention in this chapter is not to resolve the issues of dating of all the letters written during Išū‘yahb’s bishopric. However, I would like to examine some of these letters, which I believe describe Išū‘yahb’s activities during his bishopric under the rule of the Muslim Arabs. To do so, it is important to take into consideration the basic historical dates which will help us in determining and defining the chronological frame of Išū‘yahb’s activities as bishop of Nineveh. The historical sources inform us that Išū‘yahb became bishop of Nineveh not long after the ordination of Išū‘yahb II as patriarch in 628.³¹ The sources also inform us that around the year 630 or 631 and during the second term of Persian queen Bōrān’s rule (629–631), a delegation was commissioned by the queen and comprised of Patriarch Išū‘yahb II (628–646) along with a group of his bishops, including Išū‘yahb of Nineveh. The delegation was to travel to Syria and meet with the Byzantine emperor Heraclius to discuss peace between the Byzantines and the Persians.³²

²⁸ William G. Young, “The Church of the East in 650, Patriarch Išo‘Yab III and India.” *Indian Church History Review* 2 (1968): 55–71. Also, his book *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph: a study of the relationships of the Church of the East with the Sassanid Empire and the Early Caliphates up to 820 a.d., with Special Reference to Available Translated Syriac Sources*. Christian Study Centre Series, no. 8 (Rawalpindi, Pakistan: Christian Study Centre, 1974) 85–99.

²⁹ Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*. (Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin press, 1997), 178–182.

³⁰ Ovidiu Ioan, *Muslime und Araber bei Išo‘yahb III. (649–659)*, Göttinger Orientforschungen, I. Reihe: *Syriaca* 37 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009).

³¹ Fiey, “Išo‘yaw le Grand,” (1969): 324–325.

³² *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, 30; *Chronicle of Seert*, II/2 (1919), 557.

After traveling to different places in Syria, Bishop Iṣū'yahb of Nineveh returned to his diocese around the end of the year 631. The corpus of Iṣū'yahb's letters that were written during his period as bishop contain information about his activities in his diocese and other places. In general, Iṣū'yahb's correspondence and activities during his bishopric occurred during two different periods:

1. A relatively peaceful and stable period, when there were no major problems in travelling.
2. A period of turmoil, instability, calamity and chaos, which affected the possibility of travel from place to place.

The letters chosen here for discussion are ones that Fiey agrees belong to the period of Iṣū'yahb's bishopric. I would like to discuss the information contained in these letters in the context of Iṣū'yahb's activities and try to distribute them in a reasonable timeframe within his life as bishop of Nineveh. I begin with a letter written to the monks of Mount Izlā (*Ep.* 12B), in which Iṣū'yahb mentions that, in *the previous year*, he wrote a letter to the same monks but had not heard from them *since a long time*, and that he was not able to visit them because the inconvenient circumstances. He also mentions in the same letter that he was writing to them from Seleucia, where he had been staying *for a long time*.³³

In his letter to Patriarch Iṣū'yahb II (628–646) (*Ep.* 15B), Bishop Iṣū'yahb of Nineveh mentions that he had left the place (Seleucia-Ctesiphon) where he had been staying *for a long time*. In this letter, Iṣū'yahb asks forgiveness from his patriarch because he had departed from where he was staying (Seleucia). Bishop Iṣū'yahb mentions that he left a letter of explanation addressed to the patriarch in one of the monasteries (in Seleucia).³⁴ In another letter (*Ep.* 16B) Iṣū'yahb mentions that he was planning to visit the dispersed people of Assyria, although the circumstances might not help his intention.³⁵ In another letter to a group of monks of Mount Izlā (*Ep.* 16B), Iṣū'yahb men-

³³ *Ep.* 12B. 16.

³⁴ *Ep.* 12B. 20.

³⁵ *Ep.* 16B. 21.

tions that he *previously wrote two letters* to them and that it had been *a long time, many years*, that he had not heard from them or visited them.³⁶ Both letters 17B³⁷ and 18B mention that Išū‘yahb visited Seleucia-Ctesiphon.³⁸ Also in Letter 18B, Išū‘yahb asks the monks of Beth ‘Ābē to visit the patriarch in Seleucia-Ctesiphon.³⁹ In a letter to Patriarch Išū‘yahb II (*Ep.* 24B),⁴⁰ Bishop Išū‘yahb praises the pastoral efforts of the patriarch in strengthening his church and preserving the faith after a long period of dormancy. In this letter, the tone of Bishop Išū‘yahb is noticeably different as he speaks about the unstable time and turmoil.⁴¹ In his letter to Patriarch Išū‘yahb II (*Ep.* 25B),⁴² Bishop Išū‘yahb expresses his pessimistic view about his time, marked as it is by chaos and turmoil. In two letters to his patriarch Išū‘yahb II (*Ep.* 34B and *Ep.* 36B),⁴³ Bishop Išū‘yahb mentions that the patriarch had already sent him five letters of which he had received none (because of chaos and turmoil). Both letters express an intensely negative view regarding the political situation of the time. This chaotic situation did not allow Bishop Išū‘yahb to visit the patriarchate in Seleucia-Ctesiphon because of the insecurity of the roads.⁴⁴ Both letters also emphasize that the circumstances must be understood in light of the biblical portrayal of the end of the world.

In Letter 37B, Bishop Išū‘yahb describes the activity of the patriarch and the challenges that he was encountering.⁴⁵ In his Letter 38B, Bishop Išū‘yahb again speaks about the *concealed evil* which had become active by revealing itself. Išū‘yahb also speaks about the Antichrist who will soon be revealed as the end of the world nears and

³⁶ *Ep.* 16B. 22.

³⁷ *Ep.* 17B. 23.

³⁸ *Ep.* 17B. 30; *Ep.* 18B. 34, 36

³⁹ *Ep.* 18B. 29–34.

⁴⁰ *Ep.* 24B. 45.

⁴¹ *Ep.* 24B. 45–46.

⁴² *Ep.* 25B. 46–47.

⁴³ *Ep.* 34B. 59; *Ep.* 36B. 60–61.

⁴⁴ Erhart, “The Church of the East,” 62.

⁴⁵ *Ep.* 37B. 63–64.

deceive the faithful.⁴⁶ In his Letter 39B to Patriarch Išū'yahb II, Bishop Išū'yahb of Nineveh reports about the situation of his diocese. In this letter, Bishop Išū'yahb describes the difficulties and challenges that he encountered in his diocese.⁴⁷ In this letter, Išū'yahb mentions that there had been a long period during which he had not visited or received the patriarch due to danger and turmoil. Išū'yahb expresses his pessimistic view of the world, describing the unrest that "affected the world" to the point that he again considered his time as "the end of the end of the world," and hoping for "the second coming of the Lord."⁴⁸ In these outwardly and inwardly difficult circumstances, Bishop Išū'yahb describes his "restless efforts" to shepherd his people. His description of his pastoral care suggests a good number of years of experience as a bishop on his shoulders. Išū'yahb also reports about the activities of the "heretics" (the Jacobites) who, according to him, had gained a strong presence in Nineveh, chiefly due to the support of the new local "barbarian" rulers.

After following the progress of Išū'yahb's activities as a bishop, one finds it unrealistic to place all the activities described in those letters, together with all the ecclesiastical and pastoral activities that occurred in different places and on different occasions, within a very short timeframe. If Išū'yahb's activities as described in these letters are spread chronologically after 631 (the year he returned from Syria), taking into consideration his statement in Letter 39B that it had been a long time since he met the patriarch, Letter 39B should probably be placed after 636. In my opinion, this letter was written around 638 when the Muslim Arabs were already ruling the region.

The following is an outline that attempts to provide a working chronology of Išū'yahb's career as bishop:

⁴⁶ *Ep.* 38B. 64. Here, Išū'yahb alludes to 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3:5, which talks about the revealing of the Anti-Christ and his deception.

⁴⁷ *Ep.* 39B. 65–67.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 65. "حَبِّ نَافِلًا حَتَّى لَا تَسْتَوْدِعَ حَتَّى: سَبَبَسَ نَافِلًا وَفَدْوَمِيَهُ حَتَّى"

Table No. 2

Event during the Episcopacy of Išū'yahb	Approx. Year	Reference
Išū'yahb was appointed bishop of Nineveh after the election of Patriarch Išū'yahb II in 628.	628/629	<i>Thomas of Marga, Governors</i> , pp. 123–124.
Išū'yahb joined a delegation headed by the patriarch to discuss peace with the Byzantine emperor on behalf of the Sasanian queen Bōrān.	630/631	<i>Chronicle of Seert</i> , II/2 (1919), 557; <i>Chronicles of Khuzistan</i> , 30.
A letter to the monks of Mount Izlā in which Išū'yahb complains the long time he has not seen them.	ca. 631/2	<i>Ep.</i> 11B. 13–15.
After one year, Išū'yahb sends another letter to the monks of Mount Izlā expressing his concern since he has not heard from them. He mentions that he has been in Seleucia for a long time.	ca. 632/3	<i>Ep.</i> 12B. 16.
Išū'yahb left the place where he was staying in Seleucia, telling the patriarch that he sent a letter of explanation regarding his leaving.	ca. 632/3	<i>Ep.</i> 15B. 20–21.
Išū'yahb mentions his plan to visit the dispersed people of Assyria.	ca. 632/3	<i>Ep.</i> 16B. 21.

In his third letter to the monks of Mount Izlā, Iṣū'yahb mentions that it has been many years since he has heard anything from them, mentioning the successful efforts of the patriarch to revive and strengthen his church.	ca. 633/4	<i>Ep.</i> 17B. 22–29.
Iṣū'yahb mentions that he was heading to Seleucia-Ctesiphon to visit the patriarch.	ca. 633/4	<i>Ep.</i> 18B. 28, 34.
Iṣū'yahb sent a letter to Patriarch Iṣū'yahb II describing the patriarch's successful efforts in reviving his church.	ca. 633/4	<i>Ep.</i> 24B. 45–64.
Iṣū'yahb sent another letter to the patriarch with a more dramatic tone, expressing a pessimistic view of a world filled with turmoil.	ca. 634/5	<i>Ep.</i> 25B. 46–47.
Patriarch Iṣū'yahb II sent 5 letters to Bishop Iṣū'yahb, but none of them were received because of chaos and turmoil.	ca. 635/6	<i>Ep.</i> 34B. 59; <i>Ep.</i> 36B. 60–61.
Bishop Iṣū'yahb described the activity of the patriarch and the challenges that he was encountering.	ca. 635/6	<i>Ep.</i> 37B. 63–64.
Iṣū'yahb describes his time with eschatological terms, “the end of the world.” Jacobites were active in Nineveh.	ca. 636/7	<i>Ep.</i> 38B. 64.

Išū‘yahb mentions that it has been a long time since he has seen the patriarch because of instability and insecurity. He also describes his efforts in maintaining the faith in his church and taking care of his people as well as his struggle against the heretics.	ca. 637/8	<i>Ep.</i> 39B. 65–67.
Išū‘yahb mentions his visit to Tikrīt.	ca. 638/9	<i>Ep.</i> 44B. 81–85.
Išū‘yahb states that the Arab (Ṭayayē) Mhaggrē do not support those who say that “God suffers.”	ca. 638/9	<i>Ep.</i> 48B. 97.
A letter to the patriarch who was still in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, thinking of leaving the city.	ca. 638/9	<i>Ep.</i> B. 52. 104.

Dating Letter 39B is an important issue because, if my hypothesis is correct (against Fiey and others), then this is the first time in Išū‘yahb’s correspondence that the Muslim Arabs are mentioned as secular rulers (although an aspect of their faith is also mentioned). This is, in fact, among the earliest mentions in all historical sources of the Muslim Arabs. Also, and based on my interpretation, the mention that the “barbarian” rulers were annoyed because of the heretics’ claim that “God suffers” (*Ep.* 48B) means that Letter 39B is the earliest letter in which Išū‘yahb presents information about the beliefs of the Muslim Arabs.

Dating Letter 39B to the era of the Arab conquest is based on the following. The utterly chaotic situation—with calamities and difficulties affecting the entire region on a large scale that came after a short period of tranquillity and peace after the end of Persian-Roman war in 628—corresponds to the ongoing Arab conquests and their wars with the Persians and the Romans since 633. Although the period that immediately followed the assassination of Khosrow II in February 628 and the succession of Yazdegard III in 632 witnessed political instability at the imperial court, the common people and the country itself witnessed stability and peace, especially the Christians. For example, the *Chronicle of Khuzistan* mentions

that “during the time of Sheroe II (died. 628), the son of Khosrow II, there was a peace for the Christians.”⁴⁹

Sheroe II was succeeded by his son Ardashīr III (died 630) during whose reign the Christians and all the people likewise enjoyed a time of peace and prosperity. This was thanks to the administration of Mih Adar Jushnas, who was responsible for the daily administration during the time of Ardashīr III. How this man went about his task was described in glowing terms: “He carried on the administration of the kingdom in an excellent fashion, and his firm conduct of it reached a point where no one would have been aware of Ardashīr’s youthfulness.”⁵⁰

Ardashīr III ruled for one year and 6 months and was killed in March 629 by an army general named Šahrwārāz, who claimed the throne. Šahrwārāz was not from the royal family and was unable to secure the support of the nobility. When Bōrān the daughter of Khosrow II became queen in 629, there was a relative peace and the people were pleased with her policies. Throughout her fifteen-month reign, Bōrān had some success in reorganizing the war-torn Persian state by rebuilding infrastructure and lowering taxes. Her reign was marked by benevolent rule and a hope to end the political instability by peaceful means. New coins were issued, and tax relief and the rebuilding of stone bridges and bridges made of boats were ordered in order to improve the economic situation in the empire.⁵¹ Bōrān’s most important political gesture was the return of the Holy Cross to Jerusalem as well as maintaining good relations with Heraclius. “The diplomatic mission with the Byzantines was also crowned

⁴⁹ *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, 29; also *Chronicle of Seert*, II/2 (1919), 555.

⁵⁰ Abu Ja‘far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 5, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 400; Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 179. Also see *Chronicle of Seert*, II/2 (1919), 555.

⁵¹ *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 5, 403–405.

with political success and brought the region a few more years of temporary peace.”⁵²

However, Bōrān could do little about the increasing destabilization of imperial authority. Rival claimants and increasingly powerful and disloyal generals and officials undermined any successes she achieved. Bōrān was deposed by one such general in October 631 and later was killed. She was succeeded by Yazdegard III in 632. Although there was tension and conflict and political instability, the daily life of the common people was stable and there was no war in any real sense of the word. The troubles began almost one year after Yazdegard III became king.⁵³

In May–June of 633, Khālīd b. al-Walīd raided the rich region of Iraq that belonged to the Sasanian Empire. After a series of battles, he defeated the Sasanians and their Arab allies and took over several cities such as al-Hīrā in Iraq. During the next couple of years, the Arabs’ raids intensified and eventually, in 636, Sa‘d b. Abī Waqqās crushed the Persians in the Battle of Qādisiyah and took over their capital, Ctesiphon. The Persian king Yazdegard III was forced to abandon the capital and flee to inland Persia.⁵⁴ In his history, al-Ṭabarī paints a dramatic picture as the result of the Arab invasion and the conquest of the capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 637. In one instance, the military commander wrote to Caliph ‘Umar asking what should be done with the indigenous population, mostly peasant farmers. Some peasants had fled before the Arab advance, some insisted they were conscripted into the Sasanian army, and some had stayed while the battle rolled over them.⁵⁵ In a general discussion of the coming of the Arabs, the *Chronicle of Seert* states that the land was in turmoil for five years and affected by continuous evils and torment until Arab domination was solidified, at which point prosperity returned to the land and Christians rejoiced at the rule of the

⁵² *Chronicle of Seert*, II/2 (1919), 557. Also see, Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 41.

⁵³ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, 161–281.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 224–225.

⁵⁵ *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. XII, 151–152. Cf. Erhart, “The Church of the East,” 61.

Arabs who treated them with such benevolence.⁵⁶ This period of turmoil, calamities, and disturbance is the historical context for the very pessimistic view of Iṣū'yahb, who considered the calamities and the chaos of his time as signs of the end of the world.⁵⁷

Iṣū'yahb's intense eschatological presentation of political disturbance and insecurity because of the Persian-Muslim Arab war coincided with his likewise intense description of "heretical" activity especially in Nineveh and Tikrīt. This increasing "heretical activity," according to Iṣū'yahb, overlaps historically with the reorganization of the Jacobite Church in Persia in 629. The activity of the Miaphysites in Nineveh, described in his Letter 39B, corresponds to the period which followed the establishment of the Mafrianate in Tikrīt in 629. As mentioned before, this is the year the Jacobite Christian communities in Persia were organized under a new institution known as the Mafrianate whose capital was in Tikrīt. The activity and presence of the Jacobites in Nineveh became a major concern to Iṣū'yahb when members from his church joined the Jacobites. The Muslim Arab conquest of Mesopotamia was an opportunity for the Jacobites to establish themselves in the region and set foot in the same city of Nineveh. In Letter 26B, addressed to a group of monks in the mount of Alfāf, Bishop Iṣū'yahb warns these "God-fearing" monks against heretical influence.⁵⁸

Furthermore, in Letter 39B, Iṣū'yahb mentions that the heretics tried to persuade the ruling "barbarians" to support their cause. However, the rulers were annoyed because of the heretics' claims. This information overlaps with Iṣū'yahb's Letter 48B in that the Muslim Arabs (*Ṭayayē Mhaggrē*) do not support the heretics and the reason is due to their beliefs. These two letters overlap in the idea that the heretics tried to persuade the rulers, but the rulers were annoyed because they did not like what the heretics believed. This occurred when the region was in unrest and turmoil and many years after 631 when Iṣū'yahb returned from Syria. In other words, these

⁵⁶ *Chronicle of Seert*, II/2 (1919), 581–582.

⁵⁷ *Ep.* 38B. 64.

⁵⁸ *Ep.* 26B. 48.

events occurred when the Muslim Arabs were ruling in Nineveh. Letter 48B finds its historical context in Letter 39B; both refer to the same context. Thus Letter 48B is not misplaced (as Fiey and others have thought) but is part of Išū‘yahb’s correspondence from his period as bishop.

There is one more piece of information that is important and indicates that the rulers are Muslim Arabs. Išū‘yahb describes the new rulers of his region as “barbarous governors,” “who are appointed [over us] because of our sins.” This last statement shows that these new rulers have replaced old ones. They were considered socially as wild and uncouth and unfit to rule; however, they were ruling only because they were appointed as a punishment for the sins of the people. They were not from the land itself; in fact, the term ܕܒܪܝܐ [*bar baroyē*] in Syriac also means “Bedouins,” “predators,” and “the sons of the desert.”⁵⁹ From Išū‘yahb’s description we can assume he was talking about governors ruling in Nineveh under unstable political conditions which made traveling between cities and regions unsafe. And, as was mentioned above, this description matches the period of wars the Muslim Arabs fought with the Persians and the Romans.

The Arabs were called “barbarians” in many Syriac sources. In the *Life of Sabrišū‘* (early seventh century), the Arabs of kingdom of Ḥīrā are twice called “barbarians”: “so when the news of his miracles spread to the utmost of the earth and to all nations, also the barbarian race of the Arabs were in wonder because of this.”⁶⁰ We read in the same hagiographical life that “the city of Lašūm became famous among the Romans, Persians, and barbarians because of Sabrišū‘.”⁶¹ Much earlier, Saint Jerome had written: “all the barbarians of the desert live on milk and flesh of camels.”⁶² Also, in the *Life of Saint*

⁵⁹ See Robert Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), 53 and 55.

⁶⁰ *Life of Patriarch Sabrišū‘* (d. 605), edited by P. Bedjan, in *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaba, de trois Autres Patriarches d’un Prêtre et de deux Laïques Nestoriens* (Paris and Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1895), 321.

⁶¹ *Life of Patriarch Sabrišū‘*, 301.

⁶² Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II, PL 23 col. 294, 334.

Ahudemeh (575), we read the following about the Arabs: “there were many people between the Tigris and the Euphrates ... (who) lived in tents and were barbarians and murderers; they had many superstitions and were the most ignorant of all the people on earth.”⁶³ John of Penek, a near-contemporary of Iṣū‘yahb, says about the Muslim Arabs and their conquest:

Because God saw that there was no more amendment, he called against us a barbaric kingdom, a people who do not know how to listen to pleas, who know no compromise, and disdain flatteries and underhand methods, they loved to shed blood without reason, and their pleasure was to pillage everything; their passion was raids and taking prisoners, and their food hatred and anger; they were never appeased by what was offered them.⁶⁴

Finally, several Byzantine and Latin historians call Arabs “Barbarians.”⁶⁵

All of this evidence indicates that Iṣū‘yahb was writing about the Arabs during his time as bishop of Nineveh. But what shall we make of Fiey’s doubts about this? We recall that, according to Fiey, it was Maremmeh who was the bishop of Nineveh that encountered the Muslim Arabs, not Iṣū‘yahb, who at that time supposedly was already appointed a metropolitan to Ḥidyāb; this became the basis of Fiey’s doubt regarding the chronology of Iṣū‘yahb’s letters. Fiey presumed that during the Muslim Arab invasion of the Mosul region, the bishop of Nineveh was Maremmeh, who apparently *succeeded* Iṣū‘yahb in the episcopal see of Nineveh around 637. The apparent contradiction between the mention of Maremmeh as the bishop of Nineveh and the chronology of Iṣū‘yahb’s letters can be explained as follows:

⁶³ F. Nau, “Histoires d’Ahoudemmeh et de Marouta, Métropolitains de Tagrit et de l’Orient,” *PO* 3.1 (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1909), 21.

⁶⁴ Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 101–102.

⁶⁵ David D. Grafton, “The Arabs” in the Ecclesiastical Historians of the 4th/5th Centuries: Effects on Contemporary Christian-Muslim Relations,” in *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, vol. 64, no. 1 (2008): 177–192.

First, the mention of Maremmeh as bishop of Nineveh and his contacts with the Muslim Arabs is found in the *Chronicle of Seert*, which was composed almost three hundred years after the conquest of Nineveh, which makes it a very late source of information.⁶⁶

Second, what was mentioned in the *Chronicle of Seert* is the following: “Some historians say that the Muslims worked to make him (Maremmeh) catholicus. He was bishop of Nineveh and, at the time of the conquest, he had brought them food during their invasion of the Mosul region.”⁶⁷ According to this description, Maremmeh was not necessarily a bishop when the Muslim Arabs invaded the region; he may have been a distinguished monk.

Third, the mention of Maremmeh in the *Chronicle of Seert* is based on hearsay; in other words, the mention is based on unofficial information acquired from a third party and not on one’s direct knowledge.

Fourth, according to this hearsay, the Muslim Arabs were the invaders in the Mosul region, *balad al-Mawṣil*. The text does not explicitly say that the Muslim Arabs invaded the town of Mosul (which would be an anachronistic term for the ancient town of Nineveh). Here, the text talks about “the country of Mosul” which is a relatively large region that at the time of the composition of the *Chronicle of Seert* comprised a large part of Upper Mesopotamia. This probably means that the *Chronicle of Seert* is reporting on an event that occurred later in some part of the province of Mosul after the conquest of the town of Nineveh itself, which happened during the time of Išū‘yahb.

Fifth, the *Chronicle of Khuzistan* which was composed in the second half of the seventh century does not mention that Maremmeh had been bishop. After reporting that he had been monk in the Monastery of Marī Abraham on Mount Izlā, it states that he was

⁶⁶ Cf. Philip Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert* (Oxford: University Press, 2013), 1–13.

⁶⁷ *Chronicle of Seert*, II/2, 309–310.

highly praised as monk and metropolitan and that as Catholicos he was “honored by all the Ishmaelite rulers”.⁶⁸

Finally, the historical Islamic sources regarding the Muslim Arab conquest of Nineveh contain contradictory dates. According to the *Chronicle of al-Balādhurī*, Nineveh was conquered in the year 20 A.H. (641 A.D.) “After the taking of Nineveh by ‘Utbah b. Farqad (20/641) in the reign of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, the Arab crossed the Tigris, whereupon the garrison of the fortress on the west bank surrendered or promising to pay the poll-tax and obtained permission to go where they pleased.”⁶⁹ According to al-Ṭabarī, Nineveh was conquered by the Muslim Arabs immediately after the conquest of Tikrīt in the year 16 A.H. (637 A.D.). The town was conquered swiftly with no major resistance.⁷⁰ It is possible that Nineveh came under Muslim Arab control first in 637 during the time of Iṣū‘yahb as bishop of Nineveh, then again in a second invasion in 641 when Maremmeh was the new bishop of Nineveh. This same chronological dilemma exists regarding the conquest of Tikrīt and Šahrazūr, two locations near Nineveh. Both these locations were mentioned as being conquered in different stages, sometimes with peaceful surrender and sometimes with violent fighting.⁷¹

Any one of these six points is enough to remind us that the testimony of the *Chronicle of Seert* may not be the last historical word. It is certainly not strong enough evidence to base a claim that

⁶⁸ *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, 31–34. About the chronology of episcopal succession on Nineveh during the end of the Persian rule and the early years of Muslim Arabs conquest of Nineveh, see Marijke Metselaar, “Defining Christ: The Church of the East and Nascent Islam,” Ph.D. diss, 185–186, 222–224.

⁶⁹ Quoted in H. Honigmann, “Mosul,” *First Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1913–36), vol. 3, 609–611.

⁷⁰ *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 13, 55–56.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 53–54; and Al-Balādhurī, *The Origins of the Islamic State: Being a Translation from the Arabic accompanied with Annotations Geographic and Historic Notes of the Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān of al-Imām abū-l ‘Abbās Aḥmad ibn-Jābir al-Balādhurī*. 1, trans., Philip Khuri Hitti (New York: Columbia University Press. 1916), 399–400.

Išū‘yahb had no experience of the Arabs during his period in which he was a bishop of Nineveh.

Išū‘yahb’s letters during his metropolitanate of Ḥidyāb

Išū‘yahb rule as metropolitan of Ḥidyāb coincides with the Arabs’ complete conquest of Mesopotamia and a large part of Iran. The impression the letters give us is of a more settled time, and their chief preoccupation is with the defection of Saḥdūnā, bishop of Maḥūzē d-Aryūn in Beth Garmay, to the Jacobites. He had been one of the emissaries to Emperor Heracles in 630, and a disputation with a Jacobite teacher had persuaded him to embrace that doctrine. On his return he wrote a book to prove his new views as correct. Išū‘yahb heard of it and summoned him privately. Saḥdūnā admitted he had written the book but seemed convinced of its error and said that he renounced his Jacobite views. Shortly afterwards it became clear that there was really no change, and Išū‘yahb wrote a long letter and sent men with it to reason with Saḥdūnā. Saḥdūnā publicly tore up sixteen chapters of his own book and sent the men back with a letter of thanks to Išū‘yahb, but shortly afterwards he came out openly against the patriarch and tried to get the secular authorities to support his case. Only then did Išū‘yahb expel him from the Church of the East.⁷² This set of letters makes no more mention of Patriarch Išū‘yahb II; these letters were in fact written under Patriarch Maremmeh (646–649). In this set of letters, the activity of Patriarch Maremmeh is mentioned with caution, especially regarding his activities in the capital.⁷³ Išū‘yahb wants to reinforce the position of the patriarchal see in the capital, by emphasizing his role as mediator and negotiator with the secular rule and describing it in a positive manner.

⁷² Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 88–89.

⁷³ Išū‘yahb III, *Ep.* 2M. 109–111; *Ep.* 6M. 125; *Ep.* 9M. 141–145; *Ep.* 14M. 158–159; *Ep.* 15M. 159–162; *Ep.* 18M. 166–167; *Ep.* 20M. 168–169; *Ep.* 26M. 197–200; *Ep.* 29M. 206–207.

Išū'yahb's letters during his patriarchate

Most of the 22 letters that belong to the period of Išū'yahb's patriarchate were addressed to people who lived in two different geographical settings. One of these is the former Roman-Persian border area, Nisibis, the monastic community near the city on the hills of mount Izlā, Edessa (and the small Nestorian community in Jerusalem). The other geographical setting is the ecclesiastical province of Fars, which also included under its jurisdiction East Arabia, Kirmān, and India.

Nisibis and the monastic community on Mount Izlā

1. Letter (1C) to Isaac, metropolitan of Nisibis⁷⁴
2. Letter (2C) to the monks in the Great Monastery on Mount Izlā⁷⁵
3. Letter (3C) to the nobles of Nisibis against the heretics⁷⁶
4. Letter (4C) to the clergy of Nisibis against the heretics⁷⁷
5. Letter (8C) to the monks on Mount Izlā⁷⁸
6. Letter (10C) to a doctor in the school of Nisibis⁷⁹
7. Letter (11C) to a faithful man in Nisibis⁸⁰
8. Letter (13C) to the Nestorian community in Jerusalem⁸¹
9. Letter (22C) to Edessa⁸²

The metropolitanate of Fars

The Church of Fars seems to have had its origins independent of the Church in Mesopotamia. Although a bishop of Fars was included in

⁷⁴ Išū'yahb III, *Ep.* 1C. 219–220.

⁷⁵ *Ep.* 2C. 221.

⁷⁶ *Ep.* 3C. 222–225.

⁷⁷ *Ep.* 4C. 225–229.

⁷⁸ *Ep.* 8C. 238–239.

⁷⁹ *Ep.* 10C. 240–242.

⁸⁰ *Ep.* 11C. 242–243.

⁸¹ *Ep.* 13C. 245–247.

⁸² *Ep.* 22C. 283–288.

the list of the bishops' signatures in 410, Fars was made a metropolitan province of the Church of the East less than a decade later with Dadišū' recognized as its head in 424. Fars tended to go its own way, and possibly the troubled times under Khosrow II had given it a chance to drift into semi-independence. In 650 the province had at least 18 bishops, nine of whom were in the islands and south shores of the Persian Gulf, and others in Fars, Kermān, India, and possibly Sokotra.⁸³ Letters 14–21, the last in the third series, are the ones relevant to this problem. The order of these letters is chronological, and they probably cover a period of about two years, 650–652.⁸⁴ They are addressed as follows:

1. *Letter (14C) to Šem'un of Riv-Ardashīr, the Metropolitan of Fars.* The letter addresses the sorry state of the Christian church in the province of Fars, with destruction of churches in Fars and Kerman, apostasy in Mazūn, spiritual deadness among the people, and illegitimate consecrations in India.⁸⁵
2. *Letter (15C) to a doctor of Riv-Ardashīr.* This is a courteous letter to a Doctor in Riv-Ardashīr, who had evidently been supporting the metropolitan in Fars.⁸⁶
3. *Second letter (16C) to Šem'un of Riv-Ardashīr, the Metropolitan of Fars, his bishops, and clergy.* In this letter, the patriarch condemns the schismatic decision of the bishops of Fars and Beth Qaṭrayē; the bishops of these two regions had signed a petition and sent it to the local rulers, stating their independence from any other church authority.⁸⁷
4. *Letter (17C) to the bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē.* A Synod was summoned in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. In this synod the bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē and Fars were deposed. However, the patriarch asked for the sentence to be suspended and sent fresh delegations to Fars and Beth Qaṭrayē. Letter 17C was sent to

⁸³ Cf. Young, "The Church of the East in 650 AD," 55–71.

⁸⁴ Cf. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 92.

⁸⁵ *Ep.* 14C. 247–255.

⁸⁶ *Ep.* 15C. 255–256.

⁸⁷ *Ep.* 16C. 256–260.

Beth Qaṭrayē with the delegation, appealing to the bishops there to submit. Both delegations were treated badly and returned empty-handed.⁸⁸

5. *Letter (18C) to the people of Beth Qaṭrayē.* The patriarch wrote to the people of Beth Qaṭrayē appealing to them to elect new bishops and send them to him for ordination.⁸⁹
6. *Second letter (19C) to the people of Beth Qaṭrayē.* This letter tells about previous written communications with the bishops and local churches in Fars and Beth Qaṭrayē.⁹⁰
7. *Letter (20C) to the solitaries of Beth Qaṭrayē.* Iṣū'yahb complains that the monks of Beth Qaṭrayē, who were loyal to the patriarch, were being oppressed and excommunicated by the local Christian authorities, and that the people were doing nothing to stop them.⁹¹
8. *Second letter (21C) to the solitaries of Beth Qaṭrayē.* Under the stress of persecution by their bishops, they had written to the patriarch pleading for permission to compromise. The essence of his reply is that he would have had no objection if the clergy of Beth Qaṭrayē had been authentically ordained, but the monks are not to associate with schismatics to the detriment of their own souls. If the people of Beth Qaṭrayē were not even more stupid than the people of Fars, they would imitate them, and ordain their own bishops. But they say that getting the metropolitans of Fars to ordain them was a long-established custom. Therefore, the monks must separate themselves from their communion as they would from heretics and apostates.⁹²

⁸⁸ *Ep.* 17C. 260–262.

⁸⁹ *Ep.* 18C. 262–270.

⁹⁰ *Ep.* 19C. 270–273.

⁹¹ *Ep.* 20C. 273–277.

⁹² *Ep.* 21C. 277–283.

CONCLUSION

The letters of Išū‘yahb III are one of the few Syriac sources datable to the mid-seventh century which bear witness to the Arab invasion of the Sasanian Empire. It is true that he did not write specifically about Islam, because he was more concerned for most of his ecclesiastic career with the internal problems in the Church of the East. However, some of his letters do contain observations and statements relevant to the Muslim Arab conquest of the Sasanian Empire. The letters of Išū‘yahb III have been discussed in previous studies according to general dogmatic, monastic, political, and religious themes; however, most of the studies that have focused on Išū‘yahb and Islam were limited to their authors' interest of knowing about early Muslims and Islam through his letters. They paid no attention to the bigger picture, including Išū‘yahb's strategy of consolidating his church in a period of transition. The strategy involved building a platform of collaboration with the new secular authorities with an emphasis on the charismatic power of the saints to gain the hearts and minds of the people both within and without his church. This subject will be the topic of the next two chapters.

CHAPTER THREE.

IŠŪ‘YAHB III AND THE MUSLIM ARABS

The relationship between Išū‘yahb III (d. 659) and the Arabs, and the various problematic situations which this relationship involved, has long been a subject of interest for historians. This chapter deals with the question of Išū‘yahb’s efforts to build up a platform of collaboration, or rather, a loyal and stable friendship between the Arabs and the Church of the East. Together with this platform of friendship, Išū‘yahb also wished to convert the Arabs to Christianity, since for him unity of faith is the true and lasting basis of friendship. The political and religious situation in the middle of the seventh century made the path to friendship seem relatively realistic, while the project of conversion appeared to be lengthy. The patriarch therefore devoted most of his efforts to the former project. These efforts are discussed in this chapter, as we trace Išū‘yahb’s three approaches toward the Muslim Arabs. These approaches correspond to the three major periods in the patriarch’s career.

LETTERS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER, AND THEIR APPROXIMATE DATES

Table No. 3

Išū‘yahb’s Letter	Approximate date
<i>Ep.</i> 39B	637/638 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 43B	638/639 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 44B	638/639 AD

<i>Ep.</i> 46B	638/639 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 48B	638/639 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 49B	638/639 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 9M	644–646 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 10M	644–646 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 11M	644–646 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 14M	644–646 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 15M	644–646 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 18M	644–646 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 20M	644–646 AD
<i>Ep.</i> 7C	649–650 AD

EARLY ATTITUDES TOWARD THE MUSLIM ARABS

What do I mean by the “early period” of Iṣū’yahb’s attitudes toward the Muslim Arabs? It may be defined as relating to his period as bishop of Nineveh from 629 until 640. However, in a more defined historical space, Iṣū’yahb’s early attitudes may be seen to cover also the period after the Arab Muslim conquest of Nineveh and the surrounding region in 637, and before his appointment as metropolitan of Ḥidyāb in 640. This period is defined by numerous historical references in his letters. To avoid rigidity in determining the exact year in which Iṣū’yahb wrote his letters, I will regularly use the expressions “circa” or “around the year.”

A tool of punishment by God (*Ep.* 39)

Around the year 638, Bishop Iṣū’yahb of Nineveh wrote a letter to the patriarch of the Church of the East, Iṣū’yahb II (628–646), re-

porting on the spiritual and ecclesiastical situation of his diocese.¹ In this letter, Išū‘yahb describes the unstable and difficult time that he was living in. He mentions that traveling from one place to another was unsafe due to agitations and turbulence. The description of turbulence that “affected the world” to the extent that Išū‘yahb considered his time as “the end of the end of the world” and the second coming of the Lord imminent, corresponds to the ongoing Arab conquests and their wars with the Persians and the Romans.² In the midst of these and other difficult circumstances, Bishop Išū‘yahb describes his “restless efforts” to shepherd his community (which suggests a good number of years of experience as a bishop). Išū‘yahb also refers to the activities of the “heretics,” the Miaphysite Jacobites who, according to him, had gained a strong presence in Nineveh, chiefly due to the support of the local rulers. This successful activity of the Jacobites corresponds to the period which followed the establishment of the mafriate in Tikrīt in 629. However, the core of the letter is about Išū‘yahb’s gradually improving relations with the “new” local governors, especially after a divinely miraculous event which supported the faith of the “faithful” and humiliated the “heretics” before the eyes of the rulers. Before the incident of the “divine miracle,” Išū‘yahb mentions that he had experienced difficulties because of the rulers, the “heretics,” and those who were sympathizing with them from his own community. The climax of the difficulties took place during the Holy Week. Išū‘yahb portrays his struggle as analogous to the passion of Christ, describing the governors of his region as “Herod and Pilate” who were giving him a hard time while they were supporting his “heretical” rivals. However, after the occurrence of the “divine miracle” the local governors gradually began to turn their backs on the “heretics” because of their “shameful matters”:

ܘܥܒܕ ܐܠܐܘܗܝܗܘܢ ܘܥܒܕܝܗܘܢ ܘܥܒܕܝܗܘܢ ܘܥܒܕܝܗܘܢ ܘܥܒܕܝܗܘܢ
ܘܥܒܕܝܗܘܢ ܘܥܒܕܝܗܘܢ ܘܥܒܕܝܗܘܢ ܘܥܒܕܝܗܘܢ ܘܥܒܕܝܗܘܢ

¹ Išū‘yahb III, *Ep.* 39B. 65–67.

² *Ibid.*, 66–67.

حـكـمـهـمـ . وـهـمـ بـمـسـأـلـهـمـ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ اذـ حـمـاـؤـهـمـ . اذ
 حـمـمـهـمـ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ ، وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ . اذ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ
 وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ ، اذ حـمـمـهـمـ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ
 وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ . وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ
 وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ . وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ وـبـمـسـأـلـهـمـ .

When they [the heretics] were broken from the strength of their illusion because of a blow from the Lord, they went to the barbarian governors who are appointed [over us] because of our sins. And ever since, they [the heretics] threaten me daily with murder. However, I showed them that such a thing is very easy and beneficial [for me], yet it is so frightening for them, because they have no hope. However, and as usual, the Spirit of God is miraculously, slowly transforming the hardness of the barbarians to gentleness toward us. They [the barbarian governors] are embarrassed by them [the heretics], as they were embarrassed by [what happened in] Assyria.³ And because of this, the mouths of the wise men are expressing glory to the power of the Lord, of which He is worthy.⁴

Iṣū'yahb describes the new rulers of his region as "barbarous governors," "who are appointed [over us] because of our sins."⁵ This last statement reveals that the new rulers had replaced old ones.⁶ Iṣū'yahb sees these new rulers as God's tool of punishment, but their support can be won (away from the Jacobites), that is, they are not necessarily implacably opposed to the members of the Church of the East.

According to this letter (39B), Easter occurred on the same day as the first Easter: "He [Satan] prepared to us an Easter to celebrate

³ The meaning here is not clear, but it could be that "[what happened in] Assyria" is the "blow" mentioned earlier in the passage.

⁴ Iṣū'yahb III, *Ep.* 39B. 66–67.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶ Regarding the political situation between 628 and 632, see chapter two, 62–73.

which is similar in every aspect to the Passover of Our Lord, on the same day, the same time and the same way.”⁷ According to traditional calculations,⁸ the Easter of Christ most probably occurred on Sunday March 25, A.D. 33,⁹ this date agrees with Sunday, March 25, 638 AD, almost one year after the Arab Muslim conquest of Nineveh in 637. We read in the history of al-Ṭabarī that the conquest of Mosul occurred in the year 16 A.H., which corresponds to 637–638.¹⁰

It is important to keep in mind that the main interest of Išū‘yahb in writing to his patriarch is to report about the “divine miracle” that occurred in support of the “true faith.” The effect of a miracle suited the nature of the rulers who did not care for theological and philosophical discourse and for whom a theological explanation of the faith would not be a useful approach; what was needed was a divine intervention in the form of a miracle that clearly pointed to a strong God who supports his followers. The rulers were practical: they believed in a strong God and were attracted to the miracle as a sign of the strong God; they were likewise offended by the “heretics” because of their doctrine of a suffering God (as will be seen in the discussion of *Ep.* 48B below).

The Muslim Arabs as a new authority to be persuaded (*Ep.* 44B and others)

In a letter written around 638 to metropolitan Gabriel of Beth Garmay¹¹ (*Ep.* 44B), Bishop Išū‘yahb describes in angry and bitter tones the activity of the “heretics” in Nineveh and its negative influ-

⁷ *Ep.* 39B. 66.

⁸ Louis de Mas Latrie, *Trésor de Chronologie D'histoire et de Géographie pour l'Étude et l'Emploi des Documents du Moyen Âge* (Paris: V. Palmé, 1889), 93 : <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k255725q/f58.item.zoom>

⁹ Julian calendar.

¹⁰ *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 13, 52–56.

¹¹ Metropolitan Gabriel succeeded Šubḥamarān in the metropolitanate of Beth Garmay and he was part of the embassy sent by Queen Bōrān to Heracles presided over by Patriarch Išū‘yahb II in 630. Cf. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne*, vol. 3, 30–32.

ܘܐܝܢ ܐܠܡܘܨܝܢ ܘܚܝܢܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܐ ܫܘܚܝܢܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܐ ܫܘܚܝܢܝܢ
 ܘܗܝܠܐ ܫܘܚܝܢܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܐ ܫܘܚܝܢܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܐ ܫܘܚܝܢܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܐ
 ܘܗܝܠܐ ܫܘܚܝܢܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܐ ܫܘܚܝܢܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܐ ܫܘܚܝܢܝܢ.

The fervent madness of the wicked and blasphemous people who are mentioned here came about because of a satanic illusion. They found for themselves an advantageous time for obvious reasons: First, the eagerness of the current governors to hear them [the heretics], who are approaching them with incantations of money and golden persuasion [bribes]. The second reason is the multitude of evil assistants [of the governors], who in the past belonged to their heresy and now are counted among the current rulers. The third is the reception and success of the people of Tikrīt before the rulers there. Fourth, and additionally, the influence of Satan which functions among the disobedient children [of the church] who do not hold fast to living according to the love of truth. Thus, they went by themselves as they wished and wrestled [against the heretics] as they desired.¹³ However, they were unable to speak a wise word. They did not even present a persuasive plea. They did not show a sign of stewardship to the Lord. They did not accomplish anything worthy of persuasive conversation with the governors.¹⁴ After they had completed their desire they [some members of his church] returned to disturb us. They found out that the governor of this place is openly supporting them [the heretics]. They¹⁵ went down to the dung-heap near the gate of our city since they are the dung of the church. There, they made for themselves a house of foulness and stupidity in the name of a church as a meeting place, located near the place where all people

¹³ This appears to indicate that members of Išū‘yahb’s own church took it upon themselves to present their case to the authorities without the consent of their bishop.

¹⁴ The members of Išū‘yahb’s church were unqualified to debate with the Miaphysite Jacobites or to present their case to the authorities.

¹⁵ A group of Jacobites joined with some members of Išū‘yahb’s church.

usually would have to go for their natural purification [i.e., defecation].¹⁶

The Jacobites had won the support of the contemporary governors, and had even gained permission to build a church at the gates of Nineveh (which Iṣū'yahb reviles as a place of defecation). Because of the support of the local governors, the Jacobites became overconfident and began to insult and mock the Nestorians of the city. Iṣū'yahb referred to three religious parties in the town: the “heretics”, the “orthodox,” and a third party that he calls *ܣܦܗܐܠ ܣܡܠܐܠܐ*, “proper pagans”. It is not clear what he meant with this term; however, this term was mentioned in relation to a well-known man who was born of a “Christian Orthodox” father and a “Christian heretic” mother, and who oscillates between the two groups:

*ܘܗܘܐ ܗܘܢܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܥܠܘܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ
 ܘܗܘܐ ܗܘܢܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܥܠܘܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ
 ܘܗܘܐ ܗܘܢܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܥܠܘܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ
 ܘܗܘܐ ܗܘܢܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܥܠܘܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ
 ܘܗܘܐ ܗܘܢܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܥܠܘܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ*

[This person] also joined the proper heathen, as was clear to many. Then with the troubling heathenism he also joined the heretics. Because of worldly guilt, as if he suffered a blow to his brain, he returned for a short time to the church of God, until from fear of death and fear of the rulers, he fled.¹⁷

According to Iṣū'yahb, his community lacked political support and had limited and poor financial resources, while the heretics were strong and (financially) confident. The emphasis on the role of money as a tool to persuade the governors is important, first because it indirectly shows the nature of these new rulers: they were greedy, as if they had lacked financial resources before or were looters. Second, he discredits the Jacobite propaganda as being weak in apologetic and reliant only on bribes. Third, it points to the importance of relying

¹⁶ *Ep.* 44B. 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

on charismatic conviction in explaining the faith, which Išū‘yahb considered his goal in his interaction with the governors. He emphasizes that persuading the governors must be done by qualified people and that one of the reasons for the heretics’ success was due to a lack of knowledge on the part of those Nestorians who had tried but failed to explain their case persuasively before the rulers.

Išū‘yahb mentions how some of his people “with great zeal for God and the true faith” had a hard time accepting the newly built church of the heretics near the gate of the city. Thus, they planned to attack it and forcefully demolish it, not thinking of the consequences of their actions, which could lead to death.¹⁸ In order to defend his community and to spare them a vengeful punishment from the governing authority, he decided to approach the rulers of his time, although he was physically ill and psychological weary. Išū‘yahb mentions to Metropolitan Gabriel that with the help of God he began traveling toward Tikrīt, allowing himself to stay over in the middle of the city. He portrayed Tikrīt as a “theatre for evil” and a risky place for him to stay, because not only would the ruler be found there but also many of his Jacobite assistants, and they would take a stand against Išū‘yahb.¹⁹ Tikrīt played an important role in political administration; the influence of the Jacobites in this town played a supportive role for those of Nineveh; and there was a political and administrative tie between Nineveh and Tikrīt during the early years of the Arab conquest.²⁰

Furthermore, it is not clear what he meant when he mentions some people who previously belonged to the Jacobites but are now counted among the new rulers: “The second reason is the multitude of evil helpers [of the governors] who in the past belonged to their heresy and now are counted among the current rulers.” Does he mean that they religiously belonged to the ruling class and system? The reference that they had belonged to their heresy in the past means that during his time there had been a change. This means that

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁰ *Ep.* 43B. 76–81.

in the past they were Jacobite Christians, but now belonged to the religion of the governors. Al-Ṭabarī mentions that during the conquest of Tīkrīt some of the Arab Christian tribes who were living in and around Tīkrīt made an agreement with the Muslim Arabs and supported them in the conquest of the city.²¹ Those Christian Arabs were from Taḡlib, Iyyād, and al-Nimer. These tribes converted to Islam upon the conquest of the city in 637. Perhaps it is to some of these formerly Christian Arabs that Iṣū'yahb makes reference.

Around 638/9 Iṣū'yahb wrote a letter (*Ep.* 43B) to a secular Nestorian leader named Yazdnan, who probably is the son of Yazdīn,²² the famous secular leader who played an important role during the time of Khosrow II. In it, Bishop Iṣū'yahb mentions the difficulties he experienced because of the Jacobites. He asks Yazdnan to take a tougher position against the “heretics” and to support the Church of the East as his father had done before him. In this letter, Bishop Iṣū'yahb describes once again the politically unstable situation and the turmoil that was occurring in the world. His main distress came from a group of heretical ascetics who dwelled in his region and had a negative influence on the people of his community, especially when the “heretics” instigated the governors and the leaders of the region against him:

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 ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ
 ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ
 ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ
 ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܝܘܢܐ

[I will narrate all of these in a letter: I mean,] how they [the heretics] are provoking and troubling the governors and the people

²¹ *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 12, 54–56.

²² Yazdīn was an Iranian aristocrat who served as the financial minister of the Sasanid king Khosrow II (590–628). Yazdīn probably died in 627. See Nina Garsoian, *Persia: The Church of the East*. In: *The History of Christianity*, ed. by Luce Pietri, vol. 3 (431–642), (Freiburg im Breisgau: 2005), 1161–1186.

of the land [against me] every day, and how I had to deal with such challenges by visiting or by being driven before the rulers. I will write about all of these in a letter, so that it [knowledge of Išū‘yahb’s activity against the heretics] will be spread and made further known.²³

Again, Išū‘yahb emphasizes the support of the governors and rulers for the “heretics” and the necessity of explaining his case to them. Another letter shows Išū‘yahb using other means of persuading the ruling authorities (*Ep.* 46B). This letter was written around 638 to an influential man who was a bishop or abbot and had received a political function or role from the new (Arab) authority, and so had a connection to the “governor of all.”²⁴ Bishop Išū‘yahb sought his help in releasing a leader who had been helping the Christians in the region of Nineveh when they had experienced difficult times, supporting their monasteries and churches. It appears that this leader had been taken away by the governing authority, probably as a prisoner of war. Bishop Išū‘yahb thus sought the help of someone with connections to the authorities on this leader’s behalf:

ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ
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 ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܘܠܗܘܢ ܨܘܠܐ

²³ *Ep.* 43B. 77.

²⁴ Probably this refers either to the Caliph of the time, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (634–644), or the commander of the Muslim army in Iraq at the beginning of the Arab conquest.

ܘܚܝܢ ܒܥܝܢܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ
 ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ
 ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ
 ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ ܕܥܡܘܨܝܗ

Regarding this one, I beseech you, for the sake of the poor people that I was called to serve, that because of these you write to the ruling authority and the governor of all, that he would return this man to us. You can help us with your power if you decide to do so. Your request on our behalf will not be stopped, and through us your help will be extended to all the people in our region. Do not withhold the gift of help toward this poor people that turns to you, O lover of God, but do as is your habit. Strengthen those who are asking and give with your letter a persuasive power which is sufficient to bring complete help to the request of the poor. Send us this man as a governor, as if he were sent by you. When you do this, you will make us gain a peaceful way of living. In addition, all the churches and monasteries and all the saints that are present in them will be able to fulfill their complete devotion for the sake of all [the people] with the habitual prayer. Thus, they will help you in the battle for the sake of the peace of the world, for the glory of the name of the Lord, who through his grace will exalt your fate in the church as the pride of his worshipers.²⁵

The letter points out the efforts of Išū'yahb in dealing with the Muslim Arab authority and his religious concern in defending the faith of his community. What we see in all the above excerpts is Išū'yahb's confidence that the new authorities can be persuaded, whether through Išū'yahb's own charisma and effort or through finding the right mediators.

²⁵ *Ep.* 46B. 90.

A common theological ground (*Ep.* 48B)

In a letter written around 638/9 to the “children of faithful people and truly Christians: Qamyēšū‘, Sanyā, Babūsā, Ḥnanyēšū‘, Išhaq, Bar Saḥdā, and Dadyazd,” Bishop Išū‘yahb “the servant of the church of God of the people of Nineveh” again describes the difficulties and chaos of his time in eschatological terms, resulting from the weakness of faith.²⁶ He mentions that the “heretics” who were residing in the mountain of Alfāf had come into contact with the faithful people in the fortified town of Beth Babī. Bishop Išū‘yahb was angry, mainly because the monks did not show zeal in confronting the “heretics.” The letter mentions that a heretical monk who came down from the mountain of Alfāf was “buzzing like an importuned wasp near the corner of the town gate of Beth Babī, where he erected a small church because of his incantations, and left.”²⁷ The bishop criticized the monks because they did not show zeal against the heretical monk and did not remove the shrine he erected near their church. In fact, these monks justified the act and did not see anything wrong in it. The bishop emphasized the strong faith of the forefathers, and threatened these monks that if they did not show zeal in their faith and take practical action to remove the impure shrine from the door of their church, and declare the evil of the one who built, erected, and sanctified it, they would not be able to enter any of the churches anywhere and would not be able to receive holy communion. In this letter, the Arab *Mhaggrē* are mentioned, in that they were supporting the heretics. The bishop describes the way that the faithful people might explain their cause to the Arab *Mhaggrē*:

ܐܳܢ ܳܕܳܡܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ
 ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ
 ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ
 ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ
 ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ
 ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ ܳܕܳܗܳܘܳܪܳܐܳܢܳܐ

²⁶ *Ep.* 48B. 92–97.

²⁷ *Ep.* 48B. 94–96.

ܠܚܘܿܠܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܟܠܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܘܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ
 ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ
 ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ
 ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ ܕܢܘܿܬܘܿܢ

And if it happens that you [monks] would give false excuses, or that the heretics would deceive you so that you say: what happened occurred by the order of the *Tayayē*—this is entirely untrue. For the *Tayayē Mhaggrē* do not assist those who say suffering and death came upon God, the Lord of all. And if by chance they did help them for whatever reason, you can explain to the *Mhaggrē* and persuade them in regard to this matter, if really you care about it at all. Do all things wisely, O men, my brothers. Give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God. And the Lord of the Most-High will do what He does, by His hands, all good things for the benefit of those who fear Him.²⁸

This letter was written in the same historical setting of the previous letters, that is, during the unstable political situation due to the Muslim Arab invasion and the ongoing war with the Persians. Furthermore, the description of the strong activity and presence of the Jacobites in the region of Nineveh matches the period that followed their reorganization after the 628 establishment of the Mafrianate in the East. In this letter, Išū'yahb mentions the Arab *Mhaggrē* again as the rulers of the time, relating their belief in God to the Christological doctrine of the Nestorian Church. This connection based on religious belief is highlighted by accentuating the Jacobites' claim that Jesus Christ experienced suffering on the Cross in his totality as Human and Divine, since both were united during the incarnation.

This passage gives us our earliest reference to the term “mhaggrē”. The equivalent Greek form “magaritai” is found in a bilingual papyrus of AH 22/643, which is a receipt from the commander of the Arab forces in Egypt to the local inhabitants for goods provided, and it was probably from such documents or from the scribes that

²⁸ *Ep.* 48B. 97.

copied them that the Christians learned the term. In turn, the Greek derives from the Arabic “muhajir”, which is the name by which the Arabs are designated on all official documents of the first century of Islam.²⁹ The main point here is that Išū‘yahb knows something of the Arabs’ beliefs and he sees points of commonality between his faith and theirs: the denial of suffering to the Divinity. It is also important to mention that the letter was written when the relations between the bishop and the Arabs were improving. They have some legitimacy as rulers (thus “Give unto Caesar ...”) and can be reasoned with and persuaded.

An update about the new situation (*Ep. 49B*)

In a letter written around 638/9 to Metropolitan Gabriel of Beth Garmay, Bishop Išū‘yahb reports on the miraculous event that occurred in Nineveh and by which the heretics were defeated. In this letter, Išū‘yahb describes the effect of this miraculous event and mentions a previous letter that he wrote during the time of his struggle against the heretics:

ܡܠܟܐ ܡܝܪܝܢܐ ܐܗܘ ܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܢ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ.
 ܗܘ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ
 ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ
 ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ
 ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ
 ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܡܚܠܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ

²⁹ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, 179–180. *Mhaggrē* ܡܗܒܗܓܪܐ is a Syriac term used in Syriac sources to describe the early Muslim Arabs after their conquest of the Near East. The Syriac term *Mhaggrē* ܡܗܒܗܓܪܐ probably came from the Arabic term *Muhājirūn* which meant the believers who emigrated to Medina. However, this term evokes an echo of the story of Hagar, Abraham’s concubine and the mother of his son *Ismael* (Gen. 16:1–16; 21:8–21), so that it has frequently been understood as “Hagarism.” Cf. P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of The Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); also, Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*.

صَحَابَا، هَلْجَمْعَا هَلْوَعَمَدَا صَحَبَا وَبَسَلَا. هَلْجَمْعَا هَلْوَعَمَدَا
 جَمْعَا، لَجَمْعَا هَلْوَعَمَدَا وَبَحْتَلَا وَبَحْتَلَا هَلْوَعَمَدَا هَلْوَعَمَدَا. هَلْ
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A short time ago, father, when we were struggling by fighting the wicked ones, we instantly turned the face of our thoughts toward you, O steady guardian of Orthodoxy. When we were ready, and time allowed us, we wrote to inform you, with faithful reliance. Not long after this trouble, but as we were beginning to write [a letter], the mercy of the grace of the Lord suddenly hit us with an indescribable miracle, which repelled the turbulence of the impious from here. Some of them were expelled to far [places] and some of them to the holes of their hiding places, so that we in astonishment were obliged to thank [the Lord], because it [the miracle] brought back to us the accustomed peace. Not only that, but also, we have hope that the demonstration of the power of Our Lord will get stronger in striking the pride of the audacious wicked one, [i.e.] the ones [the heretics] who already have begun to experience it. You may rejoice, O father, in these things and give thanks because of them to Our Lord, as it is fitting. And you may pray for the sake of [good] things in the future, hoping that a rich end will be received through the grace of God for the glory of the holy Church, and for the rejoicing of the faithful. As for me, I see the

letter which was written a short time ago to your holiness in the middle of the tempest of the difficulties. I will send it along with this writing so that you will know more about the fight of the servants of the devil and the amazing intervention of the power of God, and the swift change that suddenly appeared to us from the incomprehensible mercy. When you know about this you will be amazed, and when you are amazed you will give thanks and praise.³⁰

Letter 49B interrelates with letters 39B, 43B, 44B, and 48B. All these letters revolve around the struggle against the heretics in Nineveh, the miraculous intervention of God, and the role of the Muslim Arab authority in this conflict. These letters, especially 39B, 48B and 49B, describe the same specific event and allude to the same attitude of the new Muslim Arab authorities in the region toward the Christians and their beliefs. According to these three letters, the Muslim Arabs supported the heretics at the beginning of their rule. Later, however, and especially after a divine miraculous intervention, the Muslim Arabs were embarrassed at the heretics' beliefs and slowly began to turn their back on them. Išū'yahb speaks about the struggle against heresy and false teaching, and also speaks about a commanding authority or force which played a role in the defeat of the heretics in his region. Letter 48B specifies that the Muslim Arabs—the *Ṭayayē Mhaggrē*—were the authorities who played a key role in this fight.³¹

Išū'yahb's early attitudes: a summary

The letters of Bishop Išū'yahb of Nineveh that were written between 637 and 640 describe his early attitude toward the Muslim Arabs after their conquest of Mesopotamia. This collection of letters underlines the support that the "heretics" received from the Arabs before and after the Islamic conquest. Bishop Išū'yahb stresses the im-

³⁰ *Ep.* 49B. 97–98.

³¹ Išū'yahb refers to the divine intervention that occurred when he was bishop of Nineveh and the defeat of the heretics in Letter 9M, 138–141, that was written around the year 647 during his metropolitanate at Ḥidyāb.

portance of bribes as a tool that the “heretics” used before and after Islamic conquest to build up a platform of collaboration with the Arabs, seeking their political and logistical support. Bishop Išū’yahb presents the “new” rulers of his region as “barbarians,” an uncivilized people that sought the wealth of the local civilized people, and this itself was a weakness of which the “heretics” took advantage. It is also important to mention that the relationship between the Jacobites and the Arabs described in the letters of Išū’yahb corresponds to other sources from the same period which describe this positive relationship, such as the *Lives of Maruthā* and *Aḥudemeh*,³² which emphasize both the good relationship of the Miaphysite Jacobites with the Arab tribes found in the region and their support for the Jacobite community.³³ In the end, the Nestorian bishop sought to defend his belief before the rulers through the power of rational apologetic discourse as well as relying on divine intervention through supernatural signs and deed of power. In other words, the bishop wanted to affirm that his faith was supported both by good theology and divine confirmation, and that, thanks to the latter, the new rulers had begun to turn their backs on the Jacobites, especially when they became aware of their scandalous belief in a God who suffered and died.

With respect to the “divine miracle” mentioned by Išū’yahb in his letter to Patriarch Išū’yahb II, we can assume from Bishop Išū’yahb’s description that this “divine miracle” occurred in the region of Nineveh around the year 637. Išū’yahb did not clearly describe what kind of a miracle it was. It is interesting, however, that the mention of this miracle in relation to the conflict with the Jacobites of the region and its impact on the secular authority of the time corresponds to what we find in a hagiographical text, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar ‘Idtā*.³⁴ This text was written before the twelfth century and narrates the life and mi-

³² François Nau, “Histoire de Maruta Métropolitain de Tagrīt et de tout l’Orient,” *PO II* (3.1) (Paris: Librairie de Paris, 1909).

³³ François Nau, *Les Arabes Chrétiens de Mésopotamie et de Syrie du VIIe au VIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Impr. Nationale, 1933).

³⁴ Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, ed., *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar-‘Idtā*, 2 vols (London: Luzac and Co., 1902).

raculous deeds of a monk named Hormizd who lived in Nineveh in the first half of the seventh century. According to this text, Hormizd was born at the end of the sixth century or the beginning of the seventh. At the age of eighteen, he travelled to Scetis in Egypt where he became a monk. On his way back to Nineveh, Hormizd met three monks from the Monastery of Bar ‘Idtā who urged him to join them in their monastery. Monk Hormizd lived a strict ascetic life in the Monastery of Bar ‘Idtā and in the Monastery of Abbā Abraham for several years. Later, he left the monastery and settled in the region of Nineveh, near the village of Alqosh where the local people built a monastery for him, which later became one of the most important monasteries of the Church of the East. The *Life of the Monk Hormizd* is marked by conflicts and struggles against the monks of the Monastery of Marī Mattā, the monastic center of the Jacobites in the Persian territories. The fame of Rabban Hormizd spread throughout the region of Nineveh because of his power in performing physical and spiritual healings. Among the miracles that he performed was, we read, that the son of the governor of Mosul was sick and nobody could heal him. The doctors asked the governor to carry his son to Rabban Hormizd so that he could be cured. The governor did as he was told, but his son died before reaching Alqosh where Rabban Hormizd was residing. However, the people of Alqosh went to the governor and advised him to bring his dead son immediately to Monk Hormizd, because they were confident that the saint would be able to bring him to life. Monk Hormizd did indeed bring the son of the governor to life; the news of this miracle spread in the region, and many glorified the Lord because of this.³⁵

This event, according to the hagiographical text, occurred in the very early period of Arab rule in Nineveh. This historical framework coincides with the time of Išū‘yahb’s episcopal activity in the region and his witness to a popular miracle that occurred in the same time and place. In short, *The Life of the Monk Hormizd* is focused on his struggle against the Jacobites of Nineveh and on the miracles that he performed. These embarrassed the Jacobites and gained the support

³⁵ Ibid., vol. 2, part 1, 97–103.

of the Arab authorities. Therefore, Iṣū'yahb is not the only witness to divine miracles which the new rulers also witnessed.³⁶ The *Life of the Monk Hormizd* provides at least a parallel to, and perhaps an explanation for, Iṣū'yahb's testimony.

PROMOTING A NEW CHURCH-STATE RELATIONSHIP UNDER THE MUSLIM ARABS' RULE

The fall of the Sasanid capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 637 into the hands of the Muslim Arabs, and the transfer of the patriarch from the city to a monastery in Kirkuk around the year 638,³⁷ created a deep crisis for the patriarchal institution of the Church of the East. The fall of the capital created two problems. The first was the relocation of the patriarchal residence to northern Iraq, which had a negative impact on the centrality of the patriarchate within the church. The second was the disappearance of a state role in keeping order within the church. The church had become accustomed to a central secular power that would enforce church norms and legislation, so that with the collaboration and support of the civil authorities the church would be able to keep its unity. When the state fell, the church faced new challenges in maintaining its unity in the absence

³⁶ Jean-Maurice Fiey highlighted the fact that the Muslim Arabs were closer to the Nestorians than the Jacobites. In support of this, Fiey referred to three letters: *Ep.* 48B which he assigned to the year 645/6, during Iṣū'yahb's metropolitanate; *Ep.* 7C, written during Iṣū'yahb's catholosate which says that the "Christian faith" is in peace and prosperity under the Arabs' rule, and *Ep.* 14C, which describes the good attitudes of the Muslim Arabs toward the Christians and their praise of Iṣū'yahb's faith. Cf. Fiey, "Iso'yaw le Grand," (1970), 30–31. However, an examination of Iṣū'yahb's early attitude toward the Muslim Arabs (i.e. during his bishopric 628–639) based on his letters 39B, 43B, 44B, 46B, and 48B shows that the Muslim Arabs were closer to the Jacobites than to the Nestorians, at least during the early period of their conquest of Iraq and in the region of Nineveh and Tikrīt.

³⁷ "Iṣū'yahb II saw the destruction of Maḥūzē by the Arabs. Thus, he left to Beth Garmay," *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, 31, line 3. With regard to the death of Iṣū'yahb in Beth Garmay and election of Maremmeh as patriarch around the year 646, see *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, 31, line 11.

of secular coercive power. In the following we will see how Išū‘yahb addressed these two problems.

Towards a new church-state relationship

Patriarch Išū‘yahb II died in 646 and was succeeded by Maremmeh on the throne of the catholicate of the Church of the East. According to the *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, Patriarch Maremmeh had a good relationship with the Arabs, and he returned to Maḥūzē (Seleucia-Ctesiphon) after his predecessor, Patriarch Išū‘yahb II, had abandoned the city in 636. The *Chronicle of Khuzistan* also mentions that Patriarch Maremmeh made great efforts in taking care of his community in and around Seleucia-Ctesiphon.³⁸ During the pontificate of Maremmeh (646–649), Išū‘yahb, who had been already appointed a metropolitan of Ḥidyāb, emphasized the symbiotic relation between the office of the patriarch, the synod of the bishops, and the historical city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

In a letter written around the year of 645/646 to the clergy and faithful of the city of Nisibis regarding certain matters that occurred in the city (*Ep.* 9M), Išū‘yahb mentions that he received their reply while he was heading to the *famous* city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The purpose of Išū‘yahb’s visit was for a “good reason” which the people of Nisibis had heard about. Išū‘yahb did not specify what the “good reason” for his visit to Seleucia-Ctesiphon was. However, he explained that the motive was so “that the Lord would prosper [the people] according to His will.” Išū‘yahb relates that a Synod was being prepared in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and that a messenger known by all and by the patriarch had been sent to Nisibis to invite the local church to participate. Išū‘yahb also mentions that while he was in the city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon hoping to meet the delegation coming from Nisibis, disturbing news had arrived about instability and disturbances in the world. Thus, after spending a certain time waiting for the circumstances to improve, Išū‘yahb and his companions returned to their country, traveling by river after receiving “urgent

³⁸ See *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, 32 and 33.

messages encouraging him to return.”³⁹ In a letter to a priest named Moses written around 646 (*Ep.* 14M),⁴⁰ Metropolitan Išū‘yahb invited Moses to glorify the Lord for what was happening thanks to the activity and zeal of the patriarch in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. According to Išū‘yahb, the state and the deeds of the patriarch were prospering thanks to miracles and signs:

ܣܒܫܘܢ ܗܘܐ ܐܘܩܘܠܗ ܕܐܘܪܗܐܘܐ ܕܗܘܝܢܐ ܕܗܘܝܢܐ ܕܗܘܝܢܐ
 ܕܗܘܝܢܐ ܕܗܘܝܢܐ ܕܗܘܝܢܐ ܕܗܘܝܢܐ ܕܗܘܝܢܐ ܕܗܘܝܢܐ ܕܗܘܝܢܐ
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Be happy and thank God for what is occurring among us. Our father the catholicos is in good health and his deeds are prospering through the glory of the Lord, and by various signs and miracles. The care of the Lord is generously fluttering over my weakness, and now I am in peace with a freedom that is higher than the servitude of the time and what my sins deserve.⁴¹

Išū‘yahb emphasizes the positive situation of the patriarchate in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The church in this city was prospering and thriving in a miraculous manner. The emphasis on miracles and signs points to an unexpected situation, where pastoral care was succeeding and church activity was reaping remarkable achievements, despite the difficulties on the horizon.

In an exchange with Metropolitan Sabrišū‘ around the year 648 (*Ep.* 18M),⁴² Metropolitan Išū‘yahb informed Sabrišū‘ about his physical health and the general situation he was dealing with. Išū‘yahb mentions that he was planning to visit the capital to negotiate and discuss the situation with both the governor and the patri-

³⁹ *Ep.* 9M. 141–145.

⁴⁰ *Ep.* 14M. 158–159.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ep.* 18M. 166–167.

arch. He also mentioned that he was going to Seleucia-Ctesiphon, of his own free will, to discuss the situation with the new ruler.

أرسلنا أنا نحن امر جنسنا وحصصنا، لخصصه لعلنا
 لنا أمتج وصدات حد. امر وج حصصنا وبعص، لخصصنا لاص
 منب صلاهنا. وحصصنا اف ده لنا أمتج و اف ده
 صدات حد. وحصصنا وج تكلنا وحصصنا. ماونهنا صلاهنا
 صلاهنا، ماونهنا وناصنا.

I am going unexpectedly, as it seems, to clarify the things about which the ruler wrote to me; however, [I am going] by my own will to see our father the catholicos and to explain to him also the things about which he also wrote to me. For both reasons for my travel, it is done much more in freedom than out of urgent obligation.⁴³

In this letter there is a reference to the secular power which probably was located not far from where the patriarch was residing. Also, this letter reveals that Išū‘yahb was playing an important role in shaping the relationship between the political power and the Nestorian church. In another letter to Bishop Sargīs around 647 (*Ep.* 20M),⁴⁴ Metropolitan Išū‘yahb assures Bishop Sargīs that the patriarch was successfully progressing in his activity for the glory of the church. He mentions a good and peaceful period for the church:

و ده حصصنا أنا حب و اوص، منب صلاهنا وحصصنا وحصصنا
 حاصنا وحصصنا و اوصنا امر وحصصنا لنا. اف سف صلاهنا
 حصصنا حصصنا حصصنا حصصنا و اوصنا وحصصنا، صلاهنا
 وحصصنا حصصنا حصصنا وحصصنا. اصنا حصصنا حصصنا
 حصصنا وحصصنا. صلاهنا وحصصنا حصصنا امر حصصنا وحصصنا.

[In this letter] I announce to you that our father the lord [Marī] patriarch is greatly prospering in the honor of the church of God, in accordance with your prayers. While all of us are enjoy-

⁴³ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁴ *Ep.* 20M. 168–169.

ing the generosity of God's help toward us, from the joy of our hearts we thank Him for His care toward us. In this way, may Your Purenness enjoy the peace of the Church and pray that it will be protected forever, as the Lord has promised.⁴⁵

Another letter (*Ep.* 10M) from around 646 and addressed to a group of monks from the Monastery of Rabban Abraham—located in the country of Beth Nuhadrē—treats a dispute over the governance of the monastery.⁴⁶ Metropolitan Iṣū'yahb advises the monks to appoint a lay person with the task of managing the worldly needs of the monastery and its properties, so that the monks might be focused on their ascetic exercises. Among the duties of the steward of the monastery was the payment of tribute to the governors at the appropriate time:

بچا افسعهلا صحعه، وحصه، مده مقبلا. سب املا وحصلا؛
 صح حصه، س صحبه س اقل: سلا، وومنا س مومو؛ حصتلا حصتلا
 وومنا. س سلا س م: املا لعلتلا، وحصلا حصه س، ام
 وروص.

Let the bishop choose one faithful layman from among you, one who is more skillful in this matter than you and appoint him as steward of the monastery in order to take care of its worldly possessions and to give taxes and payments to the governors of the world at the proper time, as is appropriate.⁴⁷

Iṣū'yahb addresses the duties of the Christians toward the state, such as paying taxes, as a sign of obedience and collaboration. He accepts them as contributing to the well-being of the Church—especially when it is centered in the ancient capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

Promoting a new era (*Ep.* 11M)

Around the year 646, Metropolitan Iṣū'yahb sent a letter to a group of monks of a certain monastery encouraging them to endure diffi-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴⁶ *Ep.* 10M. 145–149.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 148.

of mighty powers, and [the fate of] those who were doing well as well as those who were suffering.⁴⁹

This letter looks back at and describes the political situation during the last years of the Sasanid Empire. The metropolitan, writing in 646, indirectly mentions the fall of Khosrow II in 628 and what followed after his assassination, in terms of internal political instability and war against the Muslim Arabs. He expresses these events as “disturbing and painful changes,” “the swift departures of mighty people,” and “the fall of mighty powers.”

In this letter, Iṣū‘yahb reassures his own community that the political developments are part of a divine plan. The mighty Persian kingdom fell and was replaced by a new power according to the will of God. God disqualified the Persians and qualified the Arabs as the new rulers. There is a hint of the need to build up a new platform of collaboration to guarantee a secular authority to support his church.

The patriarch interprets the chaotic events mentioned in the above letter as a sign of God’s will to abandon the old power and to bring in a new one. However, the patriarch did not support rumors and claims of instability. Around 647, Metropolitan Iṣū‘yahb wrote (*Ep.* 15M) to Abbot Abraham concerning an old monk who was spreading frightful news in the region about destructions and wars. This frightful news sparked fear among the inhabitants and the monks.⁵⁰ Iṣū‘yahb told the Abbot not to be discouraged because of troubling news spread by a misguided person who claimed to be delivering eschatological prophecies. The mendacity of this person was well known to everybody “in this part of the world.” Iṣū‘yahb tells the Abbot that no one has the right to abandon his place and to move to different places. The patriarch was trying to maintain the unity between geography and demography; he did not want people to move to different places, creating a different type of geographical reality which would affect the situation of the church and its unity. An eschatological framework is used by Iṣū‘yahb to reaffirm the fact that all is proceeding according to the will of God.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 151.

⁵⁰ *Ep.* 15M. 159–162.

IŠŪ‘YAHB’S ATTITUDES AS METROPOLITAN: A SUMMARY

During the patriarchate of Maremmeh (646–649), in the writings of Metropolitan Išū‘yahb we find a more positive attitude toward the Muslim Arabs than had previously existed. This is expressed first by the emphasis on the capital as the center of political and ecclesiastical authority. Patriarch Maremmeh had returned to reside in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 646, and he had a good relationship with the Arabs. There is an emphasis on the support that the church was receiving from the political authority, which resulted in prosperity and strength. This platform of collaboration was intended to consolidate the church and its unity under a hierarchical institution. In addition to this, Išū‘yahb tried to consolidate his church and build a platform of collaboration with the state by promoting the theological judgment that the new political era was part of God’s plan to bring down the Persians and raise up the Arabs. After a period of disturbance and chaos due to political and military reasons, there was a period of high expectations and positive activity in the capital, on both ecclesiastical and political levels.

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE MUSLIM ARABS IN AN INTERRELIGIOUS CONTEXT

As we have seen, there is a gradual shift in the position of Išū‘yahb toward the Muslim Arabs. At first, he labeled them as barbarians, an indirect way of saying that the Arabs did not deserve to rule. However, their dominion had something to do with God’s punishment of the people because of their sins. We have also seen how after the defeat of the Persians in the Battle of Nahawand 642, a political vacuum was created in the region which had negative effects on the administration of the church and its unity. There were efforts to establish good contacts and built good relations with the new rulers and to affirm the patriarchal presence centralized in the capital. The historical sources show that after the initial defeat of the Persians in Iraq, the situation changed rapidly in favor of the Arabs, as more local elements submitted to and collaborated with them. There is much evidence that many Arab Christian tribes and local Christian people made peace with the Muslim Arabs. However, such actions, especially by church prelates, instigated a reaction by the Zoroastri-

you know that the sons of the monasteries are a constant source of help for us in the case of physical illness or the anxiety of the soul. However, this does not mean that this [the relying on the monk's prayers] is a reason for us to stop doing what we are supposed to do, but we must manifest all the God-fearing acts as a duty required of us to offer Regarding the matter about which you wrote to me, complaining about the audaciousness of the extinct authority which arose against you, if this really happened, I am surprised by two things: [first] that the Magi are supported by an already dead authority against God-fearing, which is always alive. [Second] that you, being a guardian of God-fearing in this present time, did not swiftly and instantly show that the dead [authority] is lifeless and powerless to have any chance of standing against God-fearing. This [standing against God-fearing] did not occur either in the past or in the present time. Thus, move yourself, O blessed man, with the zeal of God-fearing, and in a time pleasing to the Lord remove the idol far from its worshipers. Do not be afraid of a place where there is no idol. But stand actively and act strongly, as necessarily you should, when necessarily you should, and how necessarily you should, and immediately the dead will be silenced in the tomb of their vanity, as God commanded. Thus, strengthen the weak people whom you are shepherding, if they were weakened, not only with the hope of future [salvation] as we always hope, but also in the present. It is very disappointing to know that the father of your father, who held the seat of priesthood during the time of strong deception, endured death on the cross at the hands of the evil people for the sake of God-fearing, whereas you at this peaceful and flourishing time of faith sleep quietly and complain to me in writing about the harshness of the dead persecutor, expecting that your matter only requires a quick notification [to be presented] to the governors so that the authority will fight in your place, while you remain calm. [In contrary to this], take care of what is expected of you, O brother, not on-

ly for the sake of God-fearing, but also, to rid yourself of the people’s shame [directed towards you]. May the Lord strengthen and encourage you to do always what is good before Him, in all the time of your life. Stay healthy.⁵³

The text tells us that there was an uprising against the Christians of Šahrazūr at the time of the last Persian attempt to fight the Muslim Arabs. The local Christian bishop sought the help of the patriarch because of his good relationship with the Arab Muslim authorities. Bishop Jacob hoped that the patriarch would inform the Arab Muslim authorities of the Persian uprising against and persecution of the Christians. It is important to note that in 642, Šahrazūr witnessed a significant battle between the local Kurds and the invading Muslim Arabs. After suffering massive casualties, the Arabs assumed control of the region in 643. During the time of Išū‘yahb III, Šahrazūr was under the control of the governor of Mosul.⁵⁴ And because this letter was written after Išū‘yahb became patriarch, this means that this reaction against the Christians occurred around 648–650. As the Persian Sasanid rule is described in this letter as an “extinct authority,” this means that the letter was written around 650, when the Persians had lost Iraq and part of their Iranian territories.

Išū‘yahb expresses positive regard for the “new kingdom” on both political and religious levels. He mocked the Persians, considering them an “extinct kingdom,” incapable of ruling any longer. In a sarcastic manner, Išū‘yahb rebukes Bishop Jacob by expressing his disappointment in the bishop’s excuses for not having instigated a Christian anti-reaction toward the Zoroastrians. Išū‘yahb understood well that the fall of the Persian Empire would result in radical weakening of the Zoroastrians, who were seen as the religious side of the Persian rule.

⁵³ *Ep.* 7C. 236–238.

⁵⁴ Al-Balādhūrī narrates that ‘Azrah b. Qays tried to conquer Šahrazūr when he was governor of Ḥilwān during the time of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. However, he was not able to conquer it. Later, ‘Utbah b. Farqad invaded and conquered it after a fight.

Bishop Jacob is portrayed as a “guardian” or as an appointed “governor” of Šahrazūr, with the duty of subduing the defeated enemies. In fact, Išū’yahb encouraged the bishop to suppress what he considered a rebellion of an “already dead authority” and not to be frightened by the Zoroastrians, since they were no longer truly backed by any authority.

The bishop and the Christian community are seen here as an extension of the new Arab rule in subduing the local Persian Zoroastrian population and securing their regions against any Persian uprising or counter-attack against the Arabs. Thus, the patriarch asks the bishop to act immediately and forcefully to silence the Persians and their supporters “in their tombs.” Išū’yahb encouraged Bishop Jacob not only to take into his hands the responsibility of attacking the symbols of the Zoroastrians but also to secure his region from any Persian uprising. Bishop Jacob was required to act on both religious and political levels.

Išū’yahb portrays the conflict between the two communities, Christian and Zoroastrian, as a battle between good and evil, between God and Satan, between the true religion and a false one. On one side there are the Magi and on the other side the “God-fearers”; the former worship evil powers while the “God-fearers” worship God. This presentation lays the groundwork for a hagiographical literature that highlights the idea of the fight of God against false gods, good against evil, and true religion against idol worship.

In order to describe the religious and political situation of the “new era” that followed immediately the fall of the Persians and the Arab conquest, Išū’yahb used important religious technical terms and concepts, such as “God-fearing” or “God-fearers.” The terms “God-fearing” (وَمُسْتَلِحِينَ) and “God-fearers” (وَمُسْتَلِحِينَ) occur in multiple places in Išū’yahb’s correspondence.⁵⁵ Three main meanings for these terms can be deduced in the writings of Išū’yahb: first, they mean worshipping God and following His instructions in a spir-

⁵⁵ Duval, *Išō’yahb Patriarchae III Liber Epistularum*, pp. 12, 14, 18, 39, 41, 44, 45, 51, 53, 85, 88, 105, 130, 133, 138, 146, 152, 155, 161, 172, 201, 234, 236, 237, and 238.

itual and ethical conduct of life. Second, “God-fearers” are monks who worship God devotedly.⁵⁶ Third, “God-fearing” can refer to truthful worship or truthful religion, in contrast to the religion of the Magi or other false “worship” or “religion.”⁵⁷ In this third sense of the term, God stands as the One Almighty God of earth and heaven in contrast to false gods or satanic influence and tricks. It is important to mention that in at least three Iranian languages—Pahlavi, New Persian, and Sogdian—one of the existing names for Christians is derived from the Iranian root “tars,” which means “to fear.” In Pahlavi, a Christian is called “tarsak”; in New Persian, “tarsa”; and in Sogdian, “trs’q,” which is a loan-word from middle Persian. The term “Tarsa,” in turn, corresponds to the Syriac word “Dahla” or “Dahlath Alaha,” which means “God-fearing.” This term has a connection to chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles.⁵⁸ Išū‘yahb lived in a period when Christians were known in Iranian languages as “fearers,” corresponding to the Syriac expression *dhlaw d’alaha* that was used by Išū‘yahb in the sense of “God-fearers”. When Išū‘yahb uses this term to describe Christians in Syriac culture he knows very well that the same term was applied by the Persians to the Christians. Indeed, the same term is used in both cultures to refer to a Christian.

However, there is another technical meaning of “God-fearers” that Išū‘yahb must have been aware of. The term “God-fearer” derives from the Hebrew Bible’s “fearers of the Name” (Psalm 115:11). This term was further developed in the rabbinic literature to include gentiles who follow the covenant of Noah and sympathize with Judaism. “God-fearers” are those who followed some of the Judaic beliefs and rituals without becoming converts. Such people are also mentioned in the New Testament. They frequented the services of the synagogue, were monotheists in the biblical sense, and practiced some of the Jewish ceremonies according to the requirement of the

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp 46, 48, and 133.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 5, 236, 237, and 238.

⁵⁸ Shlomo Pines, “The Iranian Name for Christian and the ‘God-Fearers,’” *The Israel Academy of Science and Humanities Proceedings*, vol. 2, no. 7 (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1967), 146–150.

Law. However, they did not convert completely to Judaism through circumcision. The best known “God-fearer” was the Roman centurion Cornelius, who eventually became a Christian.⁵⁹

It seems that groups of “God-fearers” were to be found in many countries within the Roman Empire and beyond its frontiers. For the elucidation of our problem, we should pay attention to those who lived either in regions which had some political relationship with the Parthian and Sasanid Kingdoms or in the provinces of the Roman Empire bordering on those kingdoms. It was in one of these regions that the Jewish mission aiming at converting Gentiles into “God-fearers” obtained its greatest success. I refer to the so-called conversion to Judaism of the dynasty which reigned in the kingdom of Adiabene, a state which was mostly under the rule of the Parthians and which was within the sphere of influence of the Zoroastrian religion.

Shlomo Pines in “The Iranian Name for Christian and the ‘God-Fearers’,”⁶⁰ proposed that first-century converts to Judaism in Adiabene in the north of Iraq were known as “God fearers”. What is important here is that Iṣū‘yahb knew the meaning of the term and its historical uses, and it seems that he extended the use of the term to include the Muslim Arabs of his time.

Iṣū‘yahb instructs Bishop Jacob to encourage and strengthen his flock—weakened by the harassment of the Persian uprising in Šahrazūr—not only with the hope of a future salvific event (the coming of Christ), but also with the hope belonging to the present time (the fall of the Persians and the rise of better rulers). According to Iṣū‘yahb it is embarrassing that the bishop’s father, who was also a bishop, was crucified and had become a martyr during a time of great evil, while Bishop Jacob (the martyr’s descendent) now acts in a cowardly manner during a time of peace and flourishing faith.

When was a previous bishop of Šahrazūr crucified so as to become a well-known martyr? Here Iṣū‘yahb refers to Bishop Nathanael of Šahrazūr, who was crucified during the time of Khosrow II

⁵⁹ Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10.

⁶⁰ Pines, “The Iranian Name for Christian,” 148–150.

around the year 612. In the *Chronicle of Khuzistan* we learn the following about this bishop and the reason for his martyrdom:

When the king was conducting war against Darā, a certain Rad⁶¹ descended upon the churches of Šahrazūr and uprooted them. When the faithful people with their Bishop Nathanael saw this, they could not accept it, and thus they campaigned against the Rad and expelled him. He [the Rad] came to Nisibis to meet and exhort Khosrow, telling him: “You are fighting for the sake of the Christians, whereas I am being expelled by the Christians.” Without investigation, the king sent for Nathanael, bishop of Šahrazūr, and imprisoned him for six years; then he crucified him. Although Khosrow was publicly showing respect for the Christians because of Maurice, he, however, hated our people.⁶²

Here, Išū‘yahb uses a method of compare and contrast. He discusses and alludes to events in Šahrazūr where two things are alike and at the same time different from one another. If the reader is familiar with one topic, the writer can compare or contrast it with another topic to shed light upon it.

In his Letter 7C, Patriarch Išū‘yahb presents the aggression of the Magi/Zoroastrians in Šahrazūr as part of the persecutions which on many occasions broke out in Persia as a result of the symbiotic relationship between Zoroastrianism and the Persian state. In contrast to this, Išū‘yahb sees the Muslim Arabs as liberators and supporters who through their political rule established a period of prosperity and religious freedom for Christianity in contrast to a previous *time of strong deception*⁶³ under Persian rule.

⁶¹ “Rad” or “Ratu” in the Pahlavi and Avastan languages means a Zoroastrian judge or master.

⁶² *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, 21.

⁶³ *Ep. 7C. 237.*

Sebastian Brock discusses Letter 7C in his article “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam” (1982).⁶⁴ Brock, however, interprets certain statements in the letter differently:

Some of his correspondents evidently looked back to Sasanid rule with certain degree of nostalgia which we are also to find later in John of Phenek, but this only brings a sharp rebuke from the catholicos.⁶⁵

In other words, Brock read and interpreted the Syriac text as if Bishop Jacob shed tears at the passing of Sasanid rule, wishing once again for their presence. However, according to the text,⁶⁶ the tears of Bishop Jacob were not of a nostalgic kind but came from suffering at the hands of the Sasanids in their waning days.

This interpretation was repeated by Robert Hoyland in his book, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*.⁶⁷ Hoyland, following Brock, states:

There are hints that there was regret among some at the passing of Sasanian rule. Isho‘yahb had sharply to rebuke one bishop who had been mourning for the ‘dead kingdom:’ “if you were at this time upholding reverence for God,” he chides, “you would not joyfully and lightly show such reverence for what is dead, what has no power and no life.”

This same misunderstanding of some statements in the letter to Bishop Jacob was repeated also by Marijke Metselaar in her dissertation, “Defining Christ: The Church of the East and Nascent Islam.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Sebastian Brock, “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam,” in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 9–21 (notes 199–203).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁶ Bishop Jacob’s complaining about the audaciousness of the extinct authority which arose against him and his community in Šahrazūr.

⁶⁷ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 25–26, also note no. 51.

⁶⁸ Marijke Metselaar, “Defining Christ: The Church of the East and Nascent Islam,” 195.

But this does not correspond to what Išū‘yahb stated. According to the text, the patriarch rebuked Bishop Jacob, not because “he mourned” for the “dead kingdom” or “joyfully and lightly showed a reverence for what is dead,” but because he complained about “the audaciousness of the extinct authority which arose against him.”

Let me emphasize: Brock, Hoyland and Metselaar read and interpreted the Syriac text as if Bishop Jacob shed tears at the passing of Sasanid rule, wishing for their continued presence. However, according to the text, the tears of Bishop Jacob were not of a nostalgic kind but came from suffering harm at the hands of the Sasanids in the days of their waning power.

Another misunderstanding occurred when Metselaar assumed that the letter to Bishop Jacob states that Catholicos Išū‘yahb III advised Bishop Jacob to go to the ‘authorities’ and then the ‘royal authority’ would care for him:

As the problems seemed easy to deal with, Catholicos Išū‘yahb III advised the bishop to go to the ‘authorities’ (محتلها) and then the royal authority (معدلهيا حصلا)’ would care for him.⁶⁹

But this does not correspond to what Išū‘yahb stated. According to the text, Patriarch Išū‘yahb did not advise Bishop Jacob to seek help from the Muslim Arab authority, it was Bishop Jacob who was hoping that the patriarch would ask a help from the Muslim Arab authority because of the patriarch’s good connections with them.

The political rule which defeated and replaced the Sasanid Persians in the middle of the seventh century created a peaceful and encouraging period for Christianity. At least, this is what Išū‘yahb claimed. The Muslim Arabs supported the Christians on many levels since they shared with them a common religious ground: “God-fearing.” Both lifted the same flag of fighting idols and worshipping God. Patriarch Išū‘yahb had been cultivating strong connections with the Muslim Arabs since his time as bishop of Nineveh. In the context of fighting the Persians and their religious supporters, the Zoroastrians, Išū‘yahb highlighted the expressions “God-fearing”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

and “God-fearers” (and not so much terms such as “Christians” or “faithful people”) in order to evoke a wider religious-political alliance. In another term, he chose a historical term, “God-fearers,” to include the early Muslim Arabs in a new religio-political system that stood against an old Persian-Zoroastrian one. The Arab Muslim conquest inaugurated a new era in which the name of God was proclaimed and idolatries persecuted.

We will now examine Patriarch Iṣū‘yahb’s view of the Muslim Arabs in a wider framework than did Ioan, who relied chiefly on Iṣū‘yahb’s Letter 14C.⁷⁰ Based on this letter, Ioan argues that Patriarch Iṣū‘yahb saw the rule of the Muslim Arabs solely as a worldly event and that their dominion was limited solely to a temporal and political reality allowed by God. God qualifies his decision in limiting the Muslim Arab rule to “this time” alone. The rise of the Muslim Arab dominion does not have anything to do with an eschatological or Christian religious dimension. Iṣū‘yahb emphasizes that God is the one who gave to the Arabs the dominion on earth.

With such view on the new conditions, Iṣū‘yahb joined the centuries-old experience of his church, which was never a state church and never received support from a state power. Iṣū‘yahb’s remarks were aimed at convincing the members of his church that the Muslim conquest held no threat for them.⁷¹

These last statements summarize the view of Ioan. But is it possible that Iṣū‘yahb came to see the Arab rule as not only *not* a threat, but rather as something positive? Based on how Iṣū‘yahb described the meaning and significance of the new situation as a new political and religious reality at the same time, it seems to me that Iṣū‘yahb saw the Muslim Arab rule as an opportunity through which Christians might take control of the religious situation after the fall of Persia and the failure of their Zoroastrian religion. This possibility will be explored further in the next chapter.

⁷⁰ Ovidiu Ioan, *Muslime und Araber bei Iṣū‘yahb III. (649–659)*, Göttinger Orientforschungen, I. Reihe: *Syriaca* 37 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 93 and 96.

CONCLUSION

Išū'yahb's views of and reaction to the Muslim Arabs are reflected in his letters that correspond to three stages in his life: as bishop of Nineveh, as metropolitan of Ḥidyāb, and as the patriarch of the Church of the East.

During his bishopric between 636 and 640, Išū'yahb saw the Muslim Arabs as God's tool of punishment and as uncivilized barbarians. To say the least, this is a cautious and hesitant attitude towards them. It is important to note that before the fall of Nineveh into the hands of the Arabs in 637, Išū'yahb did not have great interest in siding with the new invaders. On the verge of the Arab conquests, the Jacobites were persecuted by the Byzantines and alienated by the Persians, while the Nestorians were on the rise in the whole region. The Nestorians elected a new patriarch after almost twenty years of patriarchal vacancy, reinforced their church institution, enjoyed a period of tranquillity and peace, and played a key role in the peace efforts sponsored by Queen Bōrān to establish peaceful relations with the Byzantines.⁷² They also exercised pressure on the Jacobites in Seleucia-Ctesiphon by pushing them away from vital political positions. In addition to all that, Patriarch Išū'yahb II and his bishops were well received by the Byzantine emperor Heracles in Aleppo in 630. It was for the first time since the Synod of Ephesus in 431 that the Church of the East could re-establish a good relationship with imperial Byzantine policy, to the point that Emperor Heracles received the Eucharist from the hands of Patriarch Išū'yahb II. On the other hand, their opponents the Jacobites found themselves losing Persian consideration and support at the same time as they came under strong Byzantine pressure.⁷³ All of these factors make us wonder why Bishop Išū'yahb of Nineveh would desire the fall of both kingdoms (Byzantine and Persia) and rejoice at the coming of Muslim Arabs. However, with the fall of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 637 and the defeat of the Persians in Iraq, the position of Išū'yahb gradually

⁷² See Chapter One, 41–42.

⁷³ Bcheiry, "The Birth of the Institution of the Mafrianate in the Syriac Orthodox Church in the first half of the Seventh Century" (in Italian), 93–116.

changed as he adopted a more pragmatic approach, seeking to make common cause with the Muslims against the Jacobites.

During his metropolitanate (641–649), Išū'yahb collaborated with the new political power in order to build a new Church-state relation. This new policy is reflected in his stress on the centrality of the patriarchate, not only as an office, but also as an institution enjoying political and geographical weight in the historical capital city. Furthermore, and in order to consolidate his church and build a platform of collaboration with the state, Išū'yahb tried to promote a theological standpoint of a new political era as part of God's plan; after all, it was God who had brought down the Persians and raised up the Arabs. In other words, Išū'yahb intended to introduce the new political situation by founding it upon a religious and theological ground.

The view of Išū'yahb toward the Muslim Arabs evolved further when he saw their rule as an opportunity through which Christians might take control of the religious situation after the fall of Persia and the failure of their Zoroastrian religion. Thus, Christianity might triumph with the help of the Muslim Arabs. For Išū'yahb, the Muslim Arab invasion was a vehicle that allowed him to re-establish his church and to establish his faith as the chief faith of the new empire.

CHAPTER FOUR.

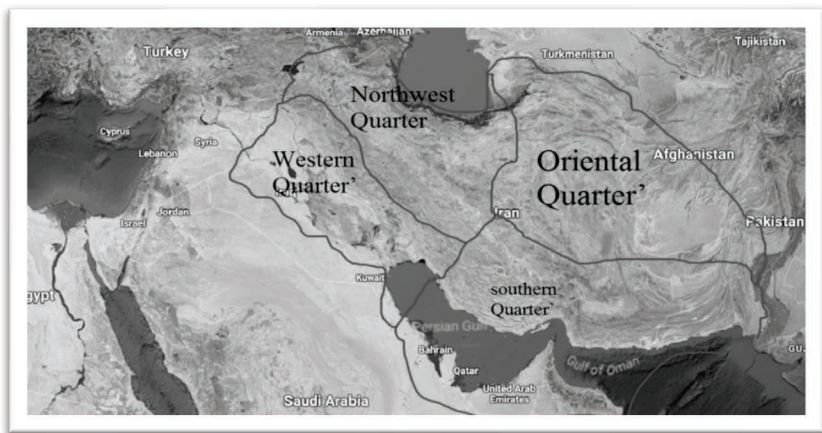
PATRIARCH IŠŪ‘YHAB’S POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE MUSLIM ARABS

The simultaneous pursuit of the orthodoxy and unity of the Church *and* good relations with the newly established Muslim Arab power was at the core of Išū‘yhab’s strategy throughout his ecclesiastic leadership, as we have seen in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I discuss Išū‘yhab’s justification of his positive attitude toward the Muslim Arabs. This justification occurred within the context of a series of crises that occurred in the ecclesiastical province of Fars. This crisis posed a severe challenge to the unity of the Church of East and to the policy of the patriarch in preserving his church by maintaining good relationships with the Muslim Arabs.

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND: “THE SOUTHERN PART OF THE WORLD”

The geographical framework of the intersection between ecclesiastical issues and politics in which Patriarch Išū‘yhab found himself involved is the “southern part of the world.” This geographical term was used by the Persian administrative empire to indicate a vast territory in south Asia that stretched from Fars and East Arabia to southern India. According to *Shahrestaniha I Eranshahr* (The Provincial Capitals of Iran), Erānšahr was divided since the reign of Khosrow I (d. 579) into four *kusts*, “regions” or “sides.” The four *kusts* or “re-

gions” were: Ḥwarasan “northeast,”¹ Ḥwarwarān “southwest,”² Nēmrōz “southeast,”³ and Adurbadagan “northwest.”⁴



Map No. 3: The *kusts* or “regions” of the Sasanid Empire

A detailed geographical division of the Persian Empire was given by Moses of Chorene, who was a prominent Armenian historian from the period of late antiquity and the author of the *History of the Ar-*

¹ Kust Ḥwarasan or Khurasan, the “Oriental Quarter,” lies northeast of Iran and extends up to present-day Pakistan, and down to the Caspian Sea.

² Kust Ḥwarwarān, the “Western Quarter,” corresponds to modern Iraq and northwestern Iran.

³ Kust Nēmrōz, the “Southern Quarter,” corresponds to modern Fars, Kirmān and Baluchistan, the Persian Gulf area, east Arabia, and the southern part of Afghanistan.

⁴ Gherardo Gnoli, “The Quadripartition of the Sasanian Empire,” *East and West* 35/1–3 (1985): 1–15; C. Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions and Economy,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3/2, edited by E. Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 747–777. J. Markwart, *A Catalogue of the Provincial Capitals of Ērānšahr, Pahlavi Text, Version and Commentary*, ed. G. Messina (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1931).

menians. In a later addition to his work, probably written shortly after 737, a list of the provinces of the Sasanid Empire is given:⁵

The region of the southeast: this is the southern area, i.e., the south, where the provinces are: Pars; Spahl, which the Indians seized away; Ḥusastan;⁶ Debuhl, which the Indians likewise seized away; Aspahan;⁷ Kirmān;⁸ Mišān;⁹ Ṭuran;¹⁰ Haḡar;¹¹ Makuran;¹² Paniat-Rsīr [Snd Srman]; Der which is an island in the sea;¹³ Spet; Mašmahīg;¹⁴ Wast; Mazūn;¹⁵ Sakastan;¹⁶ Ḥuzihrtastan; Zaplastan.¹⁷

⁵ The list of Chorene was published and translated by J. Marquart, *Ērānšahr nach der Geographie des Ps. Moses Xorenac'i*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen 3/2 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1901).

⁶ Ḥusastan or Khuzestan Province is in southwest of the country, bordering Iraq and the Persian Gulf. As the Iranian province with the oldest history, it is often referred to as the “birthplace of the nation,” as this is where the history of the Elamites begins.

⁷ Spahan, also known as Parthau, was a Sasanian province in Late Antiquity that lay within central Iran, almost corresponding to present-day Isfahan Province.

⁸ Kirmān corresponds to the present-day province of Kerman in southeast Iran. The province bordered Pars in the west and Mazūn in the south.

⁹ Meshan was a province of the Sasanian Empire. It consisted of the Parthian vassal kingdoms of Mesene and Characene and reached north along the Shatt al-Arab waterway and then the lower Tigris. Its inhabitants included Babylonians, Arabs, Iranians, and even some Indians.

¹⁰ Ṭūrān literally means “the land of the Ṭūr,” and is a region in Central Asia. The original Turanians were an Iranian tribe.

¹¹ In Islamic geographical and historical writings, Hagar seems to have two identifications: one is the whole coastal region extending from Kuwait to Qatar and Oman, and the other is as a main town in the region of Bahrain.

¹² Mikrān is a semi-desert coastal strip in Baluchistan in Pakistan and Iran, along the coast of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.

¹³ Der is the island of Dayrīn which is located off the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, near the modern towns of al-Qāṭif and al-Dammām.

The geographical term “southern area” was used by Patriarch Iṣū‘yhab III to indicate the region that comprised the ecclesiastical provinces of Fars, Beth Qaṭrayē, Mazūn (Oman), Kirmān, and India. During the seventh century, this vast region formed one ecclesiastical province under the jurisdiction of a metropolitan who was the bishop of Riv-Ardashīr¹⁸ in Fars. The metropolitan of Fars was theoretically under the authority of the patriarch in Seleucia-Ctesiphon; practically, however, he managed his province independently.

CRISIS IN “THE SOUTHERN PART OF THE WORLD”

The Persian seat of Fars had long been unwilling to submit to Seleucia-Ctesiphon, where the catholicos resided. The Nestorian sources show that the Christian community in Fars and east Arabia was characterized by its involvement in ecclesiastical schisms and divisions led by the metropolitan of Fars. The nature of the issues involved is not clear, but they probably led to questioning the authority of the catholicos as the head of the Church of the East. It seems that the Christians of Fars and the surrounding region believed that their territory constituted the real center of the Persian Christian

¹⁴ The Middle-Persian/Pahlavi name for the island was Mašmahīg, meaning “ewe-fish.” Mišmahīg or Mašmahīg is attested to in the Babylonian Talmud as a port where pearls were found (c. 250 B.C.E. and 550 C.E.). In Nestorian sources, Mašmahīg is mentioned for the first time in the year 410 C.E., when Baṭay, bishop of Mašmahīg, was excommunicated by Marī Isaac, and Elias was put in his place. Mašmahīg was a center for Nestorian Christianity.

¹⁵ Makā was a satrapy (province) of the Achaemenid Empire and later a satrapy of the Parthian and Sasanian empires (known as Mazūn), corresponding to modern day United Arab Emirates and the northern half of Oman.

¹⁶ Sakastan or Sagistan, Sistan was a Sasanian province in Late Antiquity. The province bordered Kirman in the west, Spahan in the northwest, Kushanshahr in the northeast, and Tūrān in the southeast. The governor of the province held the title of marzaban.

¹⁷ Zabulistan, originally known as “Zavolistan,” is a historical region roughly corresponding to today’s Zabul Province in southern Afghanistan.

¹⁸ An ancient city located near Bushehr south-west of Iran on the coast of the Persian Gulf.

Church and that it was linked by apostolic succession to St. Thomas. In 497 Metropolitan Yazdad of Fars rejected the Synod of Babay, and in 585 Gregory of Fars and his bishops refused to attend the Synod of Išū'yhab I (581–596). The name of Patriarch Joseph (552–567), who conducted the affairs of the Church of the East in a cruel way, was struck from the Nestorian liturgical books in Fars that normally record the high ranks of the clergy, present and past.¹⁹ In the middle of the seventh century, the schismatics in Fars tried to obtain the support of the region's rulers to confirm and support their independence from Seleucia-Ctesiphon.²⁰ When Išū'yhab III was elected patriarch, the ecclesiastical province of Fars was almost independent from the authority of the patriarchate in Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

Beside the autonomous tendency of the church of Fars there was another problem, which was the policy of the church of Fars in evangelizing and organizing the Christian community in India. The metropolitan of Fars imposed financial obligations in form of fees to be collected from candidates for the episcopacy in the territory of India. In a letter written around 650 and sent to Metropolitan Šem'un of Fars in regard to the situation of the Christian community in his ecclesiastical territory (*Ep.* 14C),²¹ Patriarch Išū'yhab rebuked Šem'un for unlawful ecclesiastical conduct in India. Patriarch Išū'yhab III criticized the custom of collecting a sum of money from candidates for the episcopacy and priesthood who wished to serve in India. According to the patriarch, this custom negatively affected the Christian presence in that territory, especially at the level of institutional church structure:

ܐܘܩܘܨܝܘܢܝܘܬܝܘܢ ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ
 ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ
 ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ
 ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ ܘܥܘܒܝܘܬܝܘܢ

¹⁹ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 178–179.

²⁰ See Young, "The Church of the East in 650," 55–71. Also, his book *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 92–94.

²¹ Išū'yhab III, *Ep.* 14C. 247–255.

And you, O faithful people into whose hands is placed the authority of administration of the islands and the dwellers of desert, those of Dayrīn, Mašmahīg, Talūn, Ḥaṭṭā, and Hagar: be diligent in this time more than any time, for the support of your faith and the legitimate priesthood that sanctifies you, rather than for worldly affairs. Choose and send to us those rebellious bishops, if you think they are still fit to repair their priestly service; or choose and send to us others who you think are more qualified for the great work and sublime service of the Church of God, so that they be anointed, sanctified, and perfected. Then they will be sent to you again with the priestly source of power, according to the law of Christ.²⁴

Retaliation against Christians in Fars and Kirmān

Alongside the growing relationship between the Church of the East and the Muslim Arabs during the early period of their conquest (as we have seen in the previous chapter), there was also a series of acts of retaliation against the Christians instigated by the fading Persian power. These acts of retaliation occurred mainly in the two provinces of Fars and Kirmān, in which were located some of the last pockets of Persian resistance against the Muslim Arabs. In the same letter that the patriarch sent around 650 to Šem‘ūn of Fars, regarding the situation of his church (*Ep.* 14C), the patriarch questions Šem‘ūn, saying:

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 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃
 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃
 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃
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 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃
 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃 𐤀𐤇𐤃

²⁴ *Ep.* 18C. 267–268.

Where are the sanctuaries of Kirmān and of all Fars? They did not last until the uprooting (which will occur at the End) by the coming of Satan, and not even until the command of the kings of the earth and not until the commands of the rulers of the world. But, it [the uprooting of the churches] occurred only because of a small puff of breath by a contemptable Demon, who is not even worthy of the honor of the devils who sent him and did not even receive from Satan the Corruptor the satanic power of deception when he appeared in your country. This [uprooting of the churches] occurred only because of a simple sign by the command of the governor that all the churches in your Fars should be totally uprooted.²⁵

As the letter of the patriarch to Bishop Jacob of Šahrazūr (*Ep.* 7C) also shows, even more local Christian populations submitted to and collaborated with the Muslim Arabs after the defeat of the Persians.²⁶ However, this decision, which was supported and encouraged by leaders of the Church, instigated a Zoroastrian reaction against the Christians. The Persian authority realized that the Christians were shifting their allegiances to the new power. Thus, alongside their military mobilization against the Arabs they also moved against the Christians who were seen as Arab supporters. What occurred in Kirmān and Fars is part of this retaliation.

Apostasy of the Christians in Mazūn

Beside the ecclesiastical situation in India, and the destruction of the Christian churches in Fars and Kirmān, the patriarch was greatly concerned about news of the apostasy of the Christian community in Mazūn. In the above-mentioned letter to Metropolitan Šem‘ūn of Fars (*Ep.* 14C), Patriarch Išū‘yhab questioned Šem‘ūn in a sarcastic manner about the news of apostasy among the Christians of Mazūn, which was part of his ecclesiastical territory:

²⁵ *Ep.* 14C. 248.

²⁶ *Ep.* 7C. 237.

ܐܡܪܐ ܐܢܝ ܥܨܝܒܐ ܐܗ ܐܬܐ ܡܚܪܝܡܐ. ܘܐܡܪܐ ܐܢܝ ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܕܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܐܘ
 ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܥܡܘܩܡܐ. ܐܡܪܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܕܥܡܘܩܡܐ, ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ
 ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ, ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ
 ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ, ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ
 ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ. ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ.
 ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ, ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ
 ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ, ܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ ܘܥܡܘܩܡܐ.

Where are your children, O deserted father? Where are your temples, O weak priest? Where are the great people of Mazūn — Those who did not see any sword and [experienced] neither fire nor suffering, but merely because of their love for the portion of their possession²⁷ were trapped like fools, so that the hell of apostasy swallowed them up and they were lost forever. Only two charred sticks,²⁸ so-called priests, have escaped from the flame of impiety; however, they were left for nothing. What great pain! From so many thousands of people called Christians, not one small offering is made to God as a fitting sacrifice for the true faith!²⁹

According to the patriarch, the Christians of Mazūn deserted their faith but not because of persecution. The patriarch states that the

²⁷ The Syriac word ܥܡܘܩܡܐ usually has been translated half. See Fiey, “Išō‘yaw le Grand,” (1970): 33; Young, “The Church of the East in 650,” 65–66; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 181; Ioan, *Muslims and Arabers bei Išo‘yabb III*, 100. It should be noted that the word that Išō‘yabb uses is ܥܡܘܩܡܐ *falḡūtā* (feminine), meaning “division,” “portion,” “share,” or “part,” rather than ܥܡܘܩܡܐ *falḡā* (masculine) meaning “half.” Of course, for Išō‘yabb, a true Christian should be prepared to give up *all* worldly possessions for the sake of the faith; see *Ep. 10M. 145–149*.

²⁸ William G. Young used the expression “smoldering stumps of fire-brands.” See his article “*The Church of the East in 650 AD*,” 55–71.

²⁹ *Ep. 14C. 248*.

Christians of Mazūn did not want to sacrifice part of their wealth for the sake of their religion:

ܘܐܝܬܐ ܒܘܪܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܟܘܬܐ. ܘܠܠܗܐ ܘܡܠܘܬܐ ܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ
 ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ
 ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ
 ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ
 ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ
 ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ ܘܡܠܝܠܝܘܬܐ

With regard to your people of Mazūn, who left their faith for their own reasons, which is made clear by the same people of Mazūn who themselves admit that the Arabs have not forced them to abandon their faith, but only asked them to give up a portion of their possession and [thus] keep their faith. Yet they abandoned their faith, which is eternal, and retained the portion of their possession, which lasts for a short time. And the faith, which was preserved by all the nations at the cost of the blood of their necks, and which they are still preserving, through which they gain eternal life—your people of Mazūn did not retain it at the cost of the portion of their possession.³⁰

In a second letter to Šem‘ūn of Fars—written around 652 (*Ep.* 16C)³¹ regarding Šem‘ūn’s act of independence in seeking the support of the secular power in order to establish the autonomy of the ecclesiastical province of Fars—Išū’yhab mentioned again that only two bishops from Mazūn, who were described as “charred sticks covered with shame,” retained their Christian faith. These two bishops, according to the Nestorian patriarch, had only the *title* of episcopacy without its power, because they were not on good terms with the patriarchate:

³⁰ *Ep.* 14C. 251.

³¹ *Ep.* 16C. 256–260.

We informed them not only about our distinct love toward them and you, but also about the special ecclesiastical honor that we were preparing to give them and you at this time. For you are in great need of the special power of God's help to strengthen your faith with a fortified wall, as the time requires, so that the damage that occurred among the people who are located far beyond you [Mazūn] would never happen to your glorious faith in Our Lord.³³

In another letter written around 652 to the people of Beth Qaṭrayē regarding the rebellious efforts of their local bishop against the patriarchate (*Ep.* 18C), the patriarch mentions again the apostasy of the people of Mazūn, locating them geographically “next” to Beth Qaṭrayē:

ⲁⲁⲥⲓⲛⲉ ⲛⲁⲛⲁⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ
ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ
ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ

I carefully examined the reasons for the evil that occurred not long ago, which is this sickness of weak faith that occurred among the peoples [of Mazūn] who are located next to you, and possibly also among you [Beth Qaṭrayē].³⁴

In this letter, the patriarch expressed his pain and anger by saying:

ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ
ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲉⲛⲉ

I do not have anything else to add to you other than the shedding of tears, for you and also for your comrades, the people of Mazūn.³⁵

Urging the bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē to obey the rules of the Church and to avoid a schism in the Church, the patriarch stated that if such

³³ Ibid., 262.

³⁴ Ibid., 262–263.

³⁵ *Ep.* 16C. 258–259.

sad things (as schism or apostasy) happened, he would weep for them as he did for their brothers, the people of Mazūn:

ألا ولا نعدن ألسانهم حصة، وهدم حياهم وأبدانهم، نحلنا من
أف ححصهم، أس وحصم حلا حرةنا محتصهم.

If the death [by estrangement] from the Church of God is inevitable for you, then I will weep for you, as I wept for your comrades, the people of Mazūn.³⁶

I will now return to the first letter to Šem‘ūn of Fars (*Ep.* 14C), in which the patriarch insisted that the apostasy of the Christians in Mazūn occurred without any persecution by the Muslim Arabs. The patriarch made sure to mention the good treatment by the Muslim Arabs toward the Christians:

هأف كمن همتا هلم وحصهم، ههد الله حركنا ههنا مهكلمنا
وحلا ححصنا، ههنا ححصنا، أس وحصمنا، ههنا ححصنا
وحمصنا، وحصمنا لا ألسانهم، ألا أف حصمنا أس
وهمصنا. هحصمنا وحصنا هوصمنا هوصمنا هوصمنا
هوصمنا.

As for the Arabs, to whom God has now given rule over the world, and who are among us, as you know: not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honor our priests and the holy men of Our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries.³⁷

Based on what the patriarch says, we can see that two events occurred in this part of the world; two events fitting into two different geographical and political contexts: on one hand, there was the destruction of Christian churches in Fars and Kirmān that took place because of a reaction against Christians instigated by the Persians: on the other, there was the apostasy of the Christians of Mazūn who, according to the patriarch, deserted their Christian faith in order to

³⁶ *Ep.* 17C. 261–262.

³⁷ *Ep.* 14C. 251.

maintain their wealth, and this was a condition imposed on them by the Muslim Arabs. The patriarch described the apostasy of Mazūn with a variety of terms such as: *ܦܫܘܬܐ*; “carelessly,” *ܦܫܘܬܐ* “apostasy,” *ܦܫܘܬܐ ܕܩܝܪܝܢܐ* “the fire of the apostasy that raged in your region,” *ܦܫܘܬܐ* “damage,” *ܦܫܘܬܐ* “little faith,” *ܦܫܘܬܐ ܕܩܝܪܝܢܐ* “little flame of the southerly heat that burnt sadly and left an everlasting devastation,” *ܦܫܘܬܐ* “destruction,” *ܦܫܘܬܐ* “their lives were cut off,” and *ܦܫܘܬܐ* “departure from faith.”

The correspondence of Patriarch Iṣū'yhab has shed light on the early Christian reaction regarding the conversion of members of their community to Islam. It intentionally asserts that the conversion of the Christian community in Arabia to Islam occurred without persecution. The patriarch described the Christian people of Mazūn as “The great people of Mazūn.” Such praise indicates the fame, importance, and number of Christians in that region. The patriarch emphasized their good treatment by the Arabs who, according to him, brought stability and peace to the Christian communities. The Arabs also helped the churches and monasteries in his country. The Arab rule was part of God’s plan; therefore, they ruled by His permission. The statement of the patriarch that “From so many thousands of people called Christians, not one small offering is made to God as a fitting sacrifice for the true faith!” indicates that there were no clergy left in that land. However, there is no sign of any effort to bring the apostatized people of Mazūn back into their former Christian faith. It seems that the Nestorian patriarch realized that those who converted to Islam did not have the choice to return to their former religion and deny Islam, as their apostasy would be punishable by death. However, it seems that the conversion of the people of Mazūn to Islam took place peacefully.

Seeking the support of the secular authority

The local bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē sided with the bishops of Fars and their metropolitan Šem‘ūn in declaring their ecclesiastical territory independent from the catholicate of Seleucia and Ctesiphon. Furthermore, they brought their case before the secular rulers for sup-

port.³⁸ The patriarch states in his Letter 17C, which was written around 651 addressing the bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē:

ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ
 ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ
 ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ
 ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ

You went hastily to meet the head of your rebellion [i.e., Šem‘ūn of Fars], without any consideration. You wrote and signed a rebellious request, and this was done against God in a foolish and ridiculous manner. Then you brought your rebellious request before the door of the rulers of the time. Therefore, you are totally condemned without hope from the life of the Church.³⁹

The meeting with Metropolitan Šem‘ūn in Fars and the seeking of support of the secular power of the time was also mentioned in the following letter (*Ep.* 18C), addressed to the people of Beth Qaṭrayē around 651/2:

ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ
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 ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ
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 ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܬܘܢ

³⁸ Although the patriarch uses general terms to describe the secular authority of the time, from the general context the secular authority is the Muslim Arabs.

³⁹ *Ep.* 17C. 261.

صحبنا وسأقلا تمنا، تحصلمنا ص حوافنا وحنا
 وأنا، ونحن. ساجم صامم صمنا سمنا. مان ص
 ما ورا ما صمنا. صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا
 صمنا، صمنا صمنا. الا ونا اصمنا ونا
 صمنا صمنا، صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا
 ونا. صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا
 صمنا. صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا
 صمنا صمنا، الا ونا صمنا صمنا. ا
 صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا صمنا.

I called the bishops of Fars to a meeting of the Church of God to receive spiritual help from the treasury of the Lord, according to Synodical law which was composed by our Holy Fathers through the Holy Spirit. I called your bishops with great love and a promise of high respect, but they did not consider that call as assistance from the Church of God, nor did they consider it as an honor from the priestly power. They did not care if Christianity would be put to shame. They left the path of life, toward the Church of God, and on the contrary they ran in the path of death, toward the meeting in Fars called by the head of the rebellion against the ecclesiastical laws. They wickedly apostatized from Christianity through a blasphemous book with wicked signatures-stamps; thereby they were alienated from communion with the Church of God forever. By doing these things, they went wild and mad, doing more than what Satan desired. Maybe for Satan, the denial of faith, like the people of Mazūn, would have been sufficient, but the bishops of Fars and Beth Qaṭrayē were so bold as to do more than Satan desired. They have denied the Christian faith [i.e. their obedience to the patriarch] by the schismatic writings and impious seals that they wrote and signed. They sent their apostasy from communion with Christianity [to the tribunal of the secular authority], so that not only the denial of faith would be confirmed upon them, as happened

to the people of Mazūn, but also upon their descendants after them, so that they would have children who are evil like them.⁴⁰

The bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē played an important role in bringing the case of the independence of the church in Fars before the Muslim Arabs so that they would obtain a protected status and be considered a community independent from Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Most likely the bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē had contacts with Arab tribes and former Christian governors in Bahrain and Mazūn, so as to be able to secure for themselves as well for the Christian community in Fars support from the civil authority. The bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē had a long relationship with the local people and tribes, and many of the members of their community were involved in the trade and pearl fishing industry, which helped their case before the Muslim governors. Patriarch Iṣū'yahb says in his letter (*Ep.* 18C) to the people of Beth Qaṭrayē around 652:

ܘܥܠܐ ܘܥ ܫܫܘܬܐ ܕܩܫܘܬܐ ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ
 ܕܒܝܬܐ ܕܩܬܪܝܐ. ܐܢ ܕܒܝܬܐ ܕܩܬܪܝܐ ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ
 ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ. ܕܩܬܪܝܐ ܕܩܬܪܝܐ ܕܩܬܪܝܐ
 ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ. ܕܩܬܪܝܐ ܕܩܬܪܝܐ
 ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ ܘܥܠܐ ܫܫܘܬܐ.

Rather than that your so-called bishops would be satisfied by hostile impiety toward the Church of God, they have aimed to show off their rebellion against the government of the Church of God to the governors of that place, and to the Great Ruler, the chief of the rulers of this time, and they have in reality been despised by the governors just as their rebellion deserved.⁴¹

The “Great Ruler, the chief of the rulers of this time” must have been the Muslim Caliph himself, ‘Uthmān Ibn ‘Affān (644–656). The following passage from the letter of the Nestorian patriarch to the people of Beth Qaṭrayē (*Ep.* 18C) describes the relationship be-

⁴⁰ *Ep.* 18C. 264–265.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

against submission to God, like madmen. The idiots do not even understand that they are commanded by us to give what ought to be given to any authority, such as the poll taxes to whom they are due, the duties to whom they are due, reverence to whom it is due, respect to whom it is due, and submission to whom it is due. On the other hand, legal submission [to the Church] law which is composed according to the love of Christ does not force us to offer Christ something in return. He will offer to us the spiritual gift ... the knowledge and power of which your bishops and those of Fars are lacking.⁴²

This letter describes the terms of submission to the power of Islam in its very early period, mentioning the duties of the Christians such as paying poll taxes and land taxes.⁴³

The administrative response of the patriarch

In reaction to the actions of the rebellious bishops, Iṣū'yahb emphasized the symbiotic relationship between the office of the patriarch, the synodical assembly of the bishops, and the city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. In the same letter of rebuke (*Ep.* 17C) that Iṣū'yahb sent in 651 to the bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē because of their attempt at secession from the patriarchal see,⁴⁴ Patriarch Iṣū'yahb stressed the centrality of these three things. He took advantage of his previous work during his metropolitanate to reinforce the centrality of the church institution under the Muslim Arabs. In his Letter 16C, the patriarch emphasized his authority—supported by the synodical assembly of the bishops—to excommunicate and dismiss the rebellious bishops of Beth Qaṭrayē and those of Fars, as well as to authenticate and restore their ecclesiastical authority:

ܘܗܘܝ ܐܢܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ
ܘܗܘܝ ܐܢܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ ܐܘܬܘܪܝܢ

⁴² Ibid., 268–269.

⁴³ A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects* (Oxford: Oxford University Publishing, 1930), 197–228.

⁴⁴ *Ep.* 17C. 260–262.

لحصه مع حبه ٥٥ صل وانسه من صلته حباه انصصه.
 ٥٥ رح بصلته و صل انصه و صل صلته حه.

Therefore, the Church of God, through the Holy Synod which was convoked at this time in the city of the catholicate seat, decided in your case what you have already decided for yourselves: that you will be estranged from the honor of the order [of the priesthood] that you are known by.⁴⁵

There is an emphasis on the geographical aspect of the seat of the catholicate, as a sign of the centrality of the Church of East. The patriarch with the synod of the bishops gathered in the historical imperial capital with all that it symbolized, emphasizes the unity and the authority of the Church. The patriarchal seat had become associated with the imperial city. After a period of confusion between 636 and 646, when the patriarch abandoned the city and there was no longer a political center as a reference to the Church, Patriarch Iṣū'yahb re-focused on the role of the capital and what it represented as an ecclesiastical center. Ecclesiastical authority is reflected in the political power of an important urban center. It is true that the capital fell and was abandoned by the Persian aristocrats and came to have insignificant political weight; however, it was still an important city in the minds of the people. Iṣū'yahb wanted to remind everyone that there was still a patriarch, seat, and synod in the traditional capital of the East, a place from which direction came and was still alive and functional.

What question did this crisis pose to Patriarch Iṣū'yahb III?

Since the time of his bishopric in Nineveh (628–640), Iṣū'yahb had sought a good relationship with the Muslim Arabs. It is true that he considered the Muslim Arabs as uncouth barbarians in the very early years of their conquest of Iraq; however, he found common religious ground with them (that God does not suffer) that would put his church in a much better situation with them than was the case with the Jacobites. His view of the Muslim Arabs improved during his

⁴⁵ *Ep.* 16C. 261.

metropolitanate in Hīdyāb (640–649). It seems that Iṣū‘yahb played an important role in establishing grounds of collaboration between the patriarchate in the capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon and the Muslim Arabs. Furthermore, during his patriarchate (649–659), Iṣū‘yahb openly supported the Muslim Arabs and considered their dominion as having been established by God himself. His vision was to establish a new church-state relationship with the Muslim Arabs from which the Church would benefit on many levels, especially with regard to insuring the unity of the ecclesiastical body of the Church of East. Patriarch Iṣū‘yahb took advantage of the Zoroastrian reaction against the Christians in Fars to intervene ecclesiastically in that territory against the schismatic tendency of the local church.

But even though the patriarch aggressively criticized the schismatic church in Fars because of the destruction of their churches and the apostasy of the Christians of Mazūn as well as their habits of collecting sums of money from India, the patriarch himself could be considered responsible for the loss of thousands of Christians in Mazūn. In the end, the Christians of Mazūn were living under the rule of Muslim Arabs with whom Patriarch Iṣū‘yahb was building a good relationship. In other words, the destruction of the churches in Fars and Kirmān and the apostasy in Mazūn drove a wedge between the patriarch and the schismatic church in Fars. The patriarch blamed the religious leaders of the local Christian communities in Fars and East Arabia for the losses and weakness of Christianity in the southern part of the world, including Mazūn. However, the patriarch’s effort to support and forge a good relationship with the Muslim Arabs was viewed by others as unsuccessful because of the Christian apostasy in Mazūn, which was under Arab Muslim rule. The patriarch considered the Arab Muslim rule as being appointed by God himself, and the period of their rule was a time of fearing and worshipping God. He religiously justified the ruling of the Arabs and advocated for their dominion. Therefore, it was a challenge to him to explain why the Christians who should have prospered under the Muslim Arabs instead had abandoned their Christian faith.

And you Persians, famous for thinking yourselves rich and proud, relying on yourselves and thinking that you do not need any help from the Church of the Lord, which comes from God himself. In all the destruction of your churches you were humble, quiet, and tranquil. You did not raise your hands or the power of your physical body against the destruction of your churches, nor was the power and proof of your religion demonstrated against the persecutors of your faith. You were unlike those people who rely on the Church of God and the prayers of the saints, so that you would return to the Church of God to make known your ruin and ask for help from the holy men of our Lord. You remained unaffected and emotionless about the destruction that has overtaken you up until now. You [Šem'ūn] did not even mention one of these [incidents] in your correspondence to me, which made me wonder and leaves me wondering. Although Satan has not yet come in the figure of the man of sin, as has been foretold,⁴⁶ and yet all these things occurred among the Christians in Fars and all the southern part of the world, what will happen during the time of Satan's coming?⁴⁷

After the patriarch had minimized the role of external circumstances, he emphasized the weakness of Christian faith in Fars and Kirmān. He followed the same tactic regarding the people of Mazūn. He defended the Muslim Arabs from any role in persecuting the Christians of Mazūn or forcing them to abandon their religion. The Arabs only asked the people of Mazūn to give up a portion of their possessions and thus keep their faith. However, the people of Mazūn abandoned their faith in order to retain the portion of their possession.⁴⁸

Again, in his letter to the people of Beth Qaṭrayē, the patriarch mentioned that Christianity was completely lost in Mazūn because of a little difficulty which he described as “a small wisp of smoke

⁴⁶ 2 Thess. 2:3–10.

⁴⁷ *Ep.* 14C. 2249–48.

⁴⁸ *Ep.* 14C. 251.

from the southerly heat.” The Christian faith in Mazūn was completely burnt and lost.⁴⁹

In his letter to the bishops of East Arabia (*Ep.* 16C), the patriarch again mentions the blasphemy that occurred in Mazūn as a result of the weakness of the faith among the Christians:

ܘܨܒܢܟܘܢ ܒܘܨܩܘܬܟܘܢ ܘܢܠܥܫܐ ܗܘܝܠܘܢ ܢܘܨܩܘܬܝܟܘܢ
ܘܚܘܨܘܢ ܘܗܘܘܢ ܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ ܕܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ
ܘܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ ܕܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ ܕܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ
ܘܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ ܕܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ ܕܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ
ܘܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ ܕܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ ܕܚܘܨܘܢ ܕܡܘܙܘܢ

When I saw now the weakness of your faith because of the abandonment [of faith], that is, the apostasy that occurred among you [in Mazūn], I called you to come to me, which means to the Church of God. This was to give you the gift of the Spirit so that you would be confirmed in it to stand against the fire of blasphemy that raged in your region [Mazūn].⁵⁰

The patriarch emphasizes the weakness of faith of the Christians in the southern part of the world, while he minimizes the external circumstances, i.e., pressure from the Muslim Arabs.

Internal weakness: an illegitimate priesthood

If internal weakness allowed for apostasy and the destruction of churches in “the southern part of the world,” the root of this weakness, according to Iṣū‘yahb, was illegitimate church government. In this ecclesiastical province there were, according to Iṣū‘yahb, unlawful episcopal ordinations and other illegal ecclesiastical practices which resulted in sacramental dysfunction in the local churches. In its turn, the sacramental dysfunction resulted in weakness of faith among the Christian people, who were incapable of performing miracles and who lacked the zeal to defend and bear witness to the Christian faith during times of trouble. The patriarch explains that

⁴⁹ *Ep.* 18C. 263.

⁵⁰ *Ep.* 16C. 257.

the unlawful episcopal appointments by the local ecclesiastical hierarchy in Fars resulted in an ineffectual priesthood among the clergy. The incompetent priesthood failed to transmit or guarantee the power of the Spirit to the local church through the channels of the sacraments. Thus, the ineffectual priesthood failed to strengthen the Christian faith in that territory with the proofs of faith, which is demonstrated through zeal and through miracles such as healing the sick and expelling evil spirits. Išū'yahb says in his letter (*Ep.* 14C) to Šem'un of Fars:

اَوْ لَا حِدْ لَّا مَحْلَعَمَصَلَا، وَحَلَلَا مَعْلَا هَلْجَ هَمَلَا لَجِبْ
 لَحْجَ مَجْ مَجْرَ حَلَجْ. اَوْ لَا حِدْ لَّا حَمَلَا حَمَلَا، وَأَمَلَا حَمَلَا
 لَحْمَلَا، حَمَلَا مَعْلَا حَمَلَا هَلْجَ هَلْجَ مَجْرَ حَمَلَا ...
 حَمَلَا لَجِبْ وَحَمَلَا مَعْلَا مَعْلَا هَمَلَا مَعْلَا لَجِبْ مَعْلَا
 حَمَلَا لَجِبْ مَعْلَا مَعْلَا مَعْلَا. هَلْجَ، وَلَا مَعْلَا مَعْلَا
 حَمَلَا. لَا وَوَا حَمَلَا مَعْلَا مَعْلَا مَعْلَا وَوَا حَمَلَا لَجِبْ
 اَمْ وَوَا مَعْلَا لَجِبْ مَعْلَا، مَجْ مَعْلَا لَجِبْ مَعْلَا مَعْلَا،
 حَمَلَا لَجِبْ مَعْلَا مَعْلَا. هَلْجَ مَجْ حَمَلَا لَجِبْ مَعْلَا مَعْلَا
 لَحْمَلَا مَعْلَا، وَلَا مَعْلَا، مَعْلَا مَجْ مَعْلَا. مَعْلَا وَوَا لَجِبْ

You do not reflect on why all of this occurred to you in the presence of everyone; is there anybody who is able to tell his friend why all of this occurred to us first? ... The source of the Christian faith is the power of the priesthood, and the power of the priesthood is transmitted through a legitimate consecration. If the consecration is done illegally, the power of priesthood will not be transmitted from above to below, as when it descended from heaven upon the apostles, and from the apostles to their successions until the end of the world. And in the case that some people would decide to rebel by seizing this [priestly] matter illegally, they would steal only the name while the power [of priesthood] will not go along with the name.⁵¹

⁵¹ *Ep.* 14C. 249–250.

the priesthood, the faith would not suddenly and completely have been lost in the southern part of the world. They would have preserved the doctrine of their faith without being shaken. They would have hidden it in the caves until the time of fear was past, or they would have sacrificed themselves to the Lord with the blood of holy martyrdom for the sake of faith. They would have done this with a glorious ending fitting the glory of our Lord. In this rich manner, the inheritance of faith was given to us by the spiritual fathers who appeared among us, whose inheritance we all preserve in the holy Church until the revelation of our Lord from Heaven. Because the Persian bishops cut off their souls from this inheritance, their life also was cut off from the hope of faith—as happened first in Mazūn.⁵²

One can illegally obtain the title of priesthood; however, this priesthood would be powerless. The signs of the powerless priesthood are lack of charismatic power, miraculous deeds, and zealous faith. To obtain the power of priesthood, one must be obedient to the hierarchy of the Church institution which is represented by the patriarch and his synod:

ܘܥܒܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܙܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܝܢܝܢ ܕܡܙܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ
 ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ
 ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ
 ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ
 ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ
 ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ
 ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ
 ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ

When I saw now the weakness of your faith because of the rejection, i.e., the apostasy that occurred among you [in Mazūn], I called you to come to me, i.e., to the Church of God. You were called [to come here] to be given the gift of the Spirit so that you would be completed in it, in order to stand against the fire of the blasphemy that raged in your region [Mazūn].⁵³

⁵² *Ep.* 18C. 264.

⁵³ *Ep.* 16C. 257.

According to Iṣū‘yahb, the Christian people are connected to the source of power, Christ, through the hierarchy of the Church. Since the local churches in Fars, East Arabia, India, and Mazūn had been detached from a lawful episcopal hierarchical authority, they lacked the power of the priesthood. The clergy of these places had the outward appearance of priesthood, but they did not have its power; as Iṣū‘yahb states in his letter (*Ep.* 21C) to the solitaries of Beth Qaṭrayē around 652/3: the power of the priesthood is manifested in performing miracles and in holy life:

ܘܡܠܟܐ ܘܥ ܘܡܢ ܦܚܐ ܘܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ. ܡܒܘܚܐ ܐܠܚܝܢܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ
 ܘܡܠܟܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ
 ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ
 ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ
 ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ
 ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ
 ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ
 ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ ܘܡܢܝܠܐ

Because of the sickness of unbelief, the foolish people of Fars and Beth Qaṭrayē first became badly ill. They were not able to demonstrate by or for themselves even one of the things that were performed for the people of God. They were not able to demonstrate any power of priesthood, which is revealed among the people of God in all places. The faith of the Christians is fully demonstrated by two signs, which are, first, the conduct of holiness, and [second,] the divine miracles that are performed by their hands. And more important than these two is to sacrifice oneself to the point of death, in order to preserve the faith. All these three occur by miracle.⁵⁴

In his Letter 18C to the people of Beth Qaṭrayē, Iṣū‘yahb explains how a non-canonical priesthood is incapable of producing miracles, even by the hands of holy men:

⁵⁴ *Ep.* 21C. 277–278.

منه وبع وبع وبع من مطلقا جبارا. هذه من زعم نحلنا وستا وميلا
صهنا، ووا لخصه بعههنا صصنا وصهنا وصهنا
جبارا. الا نحن كسبه من حبه انه اقصمه فقن حسبوا.
امر وخبه اقصمه وخبه من جبارا. منه وبع مههنا
واقصمه فقن صصنا حصهنا، الا من سنده وعصا كحبه
سكبه افلا اسمنا وميلا صصنا صهنا. لا كبهتنا
وصهنا، وانما منه له فقنا وستا ومن حله وصصنا. ولا
حصهنا وستا ككنا، وخبه صصنا صصنا صصنا
وخبه، كصهنا وخبهنا كصهنا وقوسا صصنا. ص
كبهنا وما صصنا وخبهنا صصنا، فقنه بقنه من
جبارا، وانما اقصمه فقنا صصنا وخبهنا، ولا اسمنا
وصهنا كبهنا صصنا كصهنا وصصنا. من
وهتنا وصهنا من صصهنا وستا ككنا صصنا.

The consecration of priesthood is not flowing among you, according to the law of the Church, from the source of life, [which is the source] of the priesthood's power. Instead, it [the priesthood] is given among you from a man to his comrade, as happened among the heretics who were rejected from the church. Although these [heretics] obtained the title of bishopric for themselves, they lacked the power of the name. Therefore, the demonstration of the power [of priesthood] is not found among them, neither in the conduct of holiness which is the model of the post-resurrection life, nor in performing the divine miraculous deeds which are performed by the hands of the holy men of the Lord. These [miraculous powers] are seen in the healing of the sick and the exorcism of evil spirits. Similar to this evil example of the rejected heretics, your bishops of Fars cut themselves off from the Church of God. Therefore, they were unable to demonstrate the proof of the Christian faith, which is manifested by the conduct of holiness and the performance of divine miracles.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ *Ep.* 18C. 263.

For Iṣū'yahb, there is a symbiotic relationship in the Christian life between a valid priesthood and charismatic power. To be able to face and defeat challenges, one must be armed with spiritual gifts, and the only way to have them is to be part of purposely-constituted hierarchy in accordance with the norms of the church.⁵⁶

Why remain Christian, and how can apostasy be avoided?

True power is that of the saints

After emphasizing the weakness of the Christian community in the southern part of the world and explaining the reasons for such weakness, Patriarch Iṣū'yahb turns to the charismatic power of the holy men, as he always did in his letters. The holy men here are in general the monks, ascetics, hermits, martyrs, and charismatic bishops who were called "the saints of the Lord" "صِبْغَةَ سَيِّدِنَا" through whom God performs different kinds of miracles as proof of the truth of the Christian faith. The truth of their faith is manifested, for example, in healing the sick and expelling evil spirits. The saints become a source of spiritual and physical help and at the same time a sublime model of Christian conduct for the lay community. In the following quotation (*Ep.* 14C), the patriarch makes a comparison between his territory and the rest of the southern part of the world:

وَجَلَلٌ مَعْنَا لَا مَرْحَمَ حَالًا وَصَلَى مَعْنَا وَصِبْغَةَ سَيِّدِنَا حَبِ
 وَهَدَانَا وَتَسْمَا، وَجَلَلٌ فَقُلَا وَمَتَا وَصَحْ حَالًا وَصَعْدَانَا أَمْرَ
 وَمَرْحَمَ حَقًّا أَلَا؛ وَأَلَامُنَا حَسَّ مَعْنَا وَصَحْ مَعْنَا مَعْنَا.
 وَصَحْ مَعْنَا وَصَعْدَانَا مَعْنَا حَقًّا وَصَحْ. أَفَلَا حَقًّا

⁵⁶ The imagery of legitimacy flowing like a river "reflects the ancient Indo-Iranian idea of the Heavenly River who brings the waters to the rivers and streams of the earth. Like other divinized elements of the material world, the waters must be understood from the religious perspective to be at once a physical entity and a divine reality. For the ancient Iranians water was never a neutral, objective substance, but rather substance and divinity in one." William W. Malandra, "Arədwī Sūrā Anāhitā," in *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and the Achaemenid Inscriptions*, 117–130, trans. and ed. William W. Malanida (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

the grace of God. Faith is growing, episcopacy is flourishing, and the glory of God is increasing. Only you out of all the nations on earth estranged yourselves from these; and because you were estranged from all these, the influence of the deception prevailed with ease among you, as is happening now.⁵⁷

In this passage, there is emphasis on the function of the saint in relation to the people's need. According to the text, a saint is expected to have a capacity for miraculous healing, blessing, protecting, and cursing. These characteristics comply with the portrait of the saint in most hagiographic literature:⁵⁸ people turned to saints not only for the blessing of the soul but also because of physical illnesses. The power of the saints in exorcising demons played a significant role among the helpful actions of a saint. Banishing the evil spirits was the most spectacular evidence of a saint's thaumaturgic powers. Patriarch Iṣū'yahb portrays the crisis in the southern part of the world as war between good and evil, saints and demons. He viewed the apostasy in Mazūn as if the Christians there had been lured by Satan to desert their faith. Patriarch Iṣū'yahb highlighted the role of zealous faith and the spiritual, militant life of a saint in proclaiming the Christian faith, especially under difficult circumstances.

PARALLELS AND ECHOES FROM THE PAST

When Patriarch Iṣū'yahb talks of the role of the holy men in fighting devils and strengthening the church, he is not simply talking in general terms but from his life experience and from a mental library from which he can draw cases for comparison. For instance, Iṣū'yahb gives us an example—in same letter (Ep.14C) to Metropolitan Šem'un of Fars—in regard to the destruction of the churches in Fars and Kirmān and the apostasy in Mazūn.⁵⁹ In this letter, Patriarch Iṣū'yahb mentions a similar situation of “كسبوا من الله” “an impostor”

⁵⁷ Ep. 14C. 250–251.

⁵⁸ Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 1982).

⁵⁹ Ep. 14C. 247–255.

and “*ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ*” “a destroyer of churches” that had previously⁶⁰ occurred in Radan,⁶¹ which is a region located northeast of Seleucia-Ctesiphon:

ܐܢ ܐܘܫܝܟܢ ܡܢ ܐܢܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ
 ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ
 ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ
 ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ
 ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ
 ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ
 ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ ܡܚܚܒܐ ܕܥܩܘܠܐ

With regard to your impostor and the destroyer of your churches, he appeared first among us in the region of Radan, a country of idolatry much more than Christianity but, because of the glory of the Christians’ conduct, not even the pagans were led astray by him. Instead, he was driven away from there in disgrace. Not only did he not uproot the churches, but he himself was uprooted. Yet, your [province of] Fars accepted him by [the acceptance of] its pagans and Christians, and he worked among them as he pleased, through the obedience and acceptance of the pagans and the inaction and silence of the Christians.⁶²

The impostor who led the pagans⁶³ astray and destroyed the Christian churches in Fars and Kirmān is the same one who was manifested in the past and had appeared in Radan, which is a region located within the patriarchal territory of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Iṣū’yahb tells us that the influence of this deceiver prevailed among the pagans more than the Christians. In other words, it was expected that the pagans would more easily be led astray by the impostor. According

⁶⁰ Iṣū’yahb *did not tell us when exactly this occurred*.

⁶¹ The region of Radan is located now a day in the governate of Diyala in north east of Baghdad.

⁶² *Ep.* 14C. 251.

⁶³ The pagans here are the Zoroastrians. See Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 280–305, 384–430. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 181.

to Iṣū'yahb, the activity of the impostor was to deviously draw the pagans into more falsehood (blinding them with his false worship) and to aggressively destroy the Christian churches. The pagans in Fars and Kirmān received this deceiver with collaboration and submission, while the Christians in these two regions were afraid to stand against him when he destroyed their churches.⁶⁴

Can the “deceiver” be identified with a historical figure?

It is unlikely that a heretical Christian person or movement would be able to destroy the churches of the Christian majority (Nestorians) in Radan, Fars and Kirmān and, at the same time, intimidate the pagans in these regions on a large scale.⁶⁵ Also, since the patriarch defended the Muslim Arabs from any accusation of destroying the churches, harming Christians, or forcing them to abandon their faith, this means that the “deceiver” cannot be identified with any of the Muslim Arabs.

To have a better idea about the identity of this impostor who failed to destroy the Christian churches in Radan, having been effective in destroying their churches in Fars and Kirmān, we return again to the same letter of Iṣū'yahb (*Ep.* 14C). In this letter, Iṣū'yahb mentions that the destruction of the churches in “Kirmān and of all Fars” did not occur because of a command by high political authorities, “the kings of the earth” or “the rulers of the world.” Rather, the uprooting of the churches occurred only because of a small puff of breath by a contemptable demon, who was sent by demons of higher level and who appeared in Fars and Kirmān.⁶⁶ The small puff of breath of this meek devil who instigated the destruction of the churches, practicably occurred through a simple sign by the command of the local Persian governor, probably the governor of Fars.

⁶⁴ *Ep.* 14C. 248

⁶⁵ Compare Young, “The Church of the East in 650,” 64; Also, his book *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, 96–97; and Ioan, *Muslims und Araber bei Iṣū'yahb III*, 94–95 who identified the “deceiver” with a heretical person.

⁶⁶ *Ep.* 14C. 248.

In my opinion, the deceiver and destroyer of Christian churches who had, according to the patriarch, appeared previously in Radan and then in Fars and Kirmān, was a manifestation of Satan reflected in a radical Zoroastrian movement which engaged in anti-Christian activities. This anti-Christian movement had appeared in the region of Radan in the past with the support of the local Sasanian governors of that time. In other words, Patriarch Iṣū'yhab alludes to previous events of persecution by a radical Zoroastrianism that broke out in Radan. Here, Iṣū'yhab is not making a claim about any individual person who appeared in Radan as well as in Kirmān, Fars, or Mazūn, but he is thinking of various manifestations of the Evil One, who has appeared at various places at different times. The "Devil" makes different moves in different places at different times, taking advantage when faith is weak and the grace of God is absent.

When did the Devil try to destroy the churches in Radan, only to meet with resistance from the saints? Here we may find some help in the *Life of Patriarch Sabrīšū'* (catholicos of the Church of the East 596–604), which provides us with some background to what was being said by Iṣū'yhab.

***The Life of Patriarch Sabrīšū'* (d. 604)⁶⁷**

The *Life of Patriarch Sabrīšū'* is a hagiographical text, primarily interested in the miracles of Patriarch Sabrīšū' (596–604) and written by a monk named Peter of Beth 'Abē. Monk Peter lived in the same Monastery of Beth 'Abē when Iṣū'yhab was living there as a monk. Peter (like Iṣū'yhab) was a contemporary of Catholicos Sabrīšū' I (596–604), and undertook to write his *Life* and *Miracles*.⁶⁸ His *Life* tells us that Sabrīšū' was born around the year 525 in a village called

⁶⁷ P. Bedjan, ed., *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaba, de trois Autres Patriarches d'un Prêtre et de deux Laïques Nestoriens* (Paris and Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1895), 288–331. The notices about him in the *Chronicle of Seert*, II/2 (1919), 154–178 add some further miracles.

⁶⁸ About the life of Monk Peter, see Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne*, vol. 3, 56–57, note 8.

Firūzabad near the border of Šahrazūr, in the region of Beth Garmay. He lived as a shepherd before his village priest saw his ability and started teaching him. Sabrīšū‘ then went on to the School of Nisibis, after which he lived an ascetic life in the region of Qardū and Sha‘rān near Radan. He was appointed bishop of Lashom sometime after 576, and undertook several missionary journeys. During one of these he became involved in the conversion of King Nu‘mān III of Ḥīrā. Shortly after his appointment as catholicos in 596 (at the orders of Khosrow II) he convened a synod to deal with various doctrinal matters and abuses.

Sabrīšū‘ battling and defeating the devil in and around Radan

The Life of Patriarch Sabrīšū‘ by Išū‘yhab’s friend ‘Petros the solitary’ is much concerned with his miracles: According to his *Life*, Sabrīšū‘’s zeal in preaching and evangelizing the pagans and Zoroastrians was remarkable. Because of that, the Devil became angry, especially after seeing how the churches survived his intended destruction while his own temples in the region of Balšafar and Radan were destroyed, and how his followers abandoned his false worship and converted to Christianity—all because of saint Sabrīšū‘. Therefore, Satan instigated the Zoroastrians against Sabrīšū‘. These drove him before the governors and judges of the time who, in turn, threw him into prison. God, however, saved him and he was freed.

According to Peter’s narrative, Sabrīšū‘ was able to cleanse the entire region of Balšafar and Radan from the evil act of worshiping idols, especially the region of Radan which had been a stronghold of paganism. In fact, Radan and the surrounding regions are pictured as the main battlefield between Sabrīšū‘ and the Devil. On many occasions the Devil avoided the saint to the point that he was mocked by his followers because of his defeat. Not only did the Devil fail to destroy the Christian churches, but also his pagan followers turned their back on him and followed the saint:

ارحى لها ورسقوسه ددخدلا، ددخدلا دوما ملكا ددخدلا،
 ددلا قهلا ددخدلتا، ددخدلتا ددخدقتا. ده ددخدو حت
 ددخدلا لا ددخدو ددخدو ددخدلتا ددخدو ددخدلا لها
 ددخدو ددخدو، الا اف سقا ددخدو ددخدو ددخدو ددخدو
 ددخدو ددخدو. ددخدو ددخدو ددخدو ددخدو ددخدو.

was also given the healing from the pain of their souls. He gave them [this blessing] by a look and a word. As I said before, it is true that he did not learn the knowledge of speech,⁶⁹ however, his deeds were more satisfactory to those who would gather around him to learn than [to learn] through all the teachers, the learned and the wise. The sight of him became like a mirror so that anyone would beautify the face of his soul [by looking at it]. When he [the saint] became rich in all of these [miracles] through the love of his Lord, and he showed all of these in the battle against his enemy, he gained a victory over him by reducing the power of the tyrant. In every match with his [the Devil's] evil and in every way, he [the saint] would fight with him [the Devil] and throw down his pride, as one condemned; he [the Devil] would flee after having been struck by the arrows of the saint's glory. Everyone was amazed by the saint and laughing at the disgrace of the audacious one who was humiliated and defeated by a mortal man and nearly vanished. He [the Devil] saw with his deceiving eyes that his sure place of refuge had been destroyed at the hands of the saint. The places of idolatry dedicated to his evil, which were built by the impostor in the regions of Radan and Balšafar, were uprooted by the chief of the children of the Truth. The naive worshipers of Shame were returning by his [the saint's] hands to the path of life, which made them faithful [people] and adorers of Christ.⁷⁰

On another occasion, the devil was defeated in a village called Ša'd in the region of Radan:

ܠܗܘܬ ܥܢܢܐ ܣܒܐ ܥܡܢ ܡܢܨܘܢܐ, ܘܡܠܟܐ ܕܠܡܨܘܢܐ ܘܘܝܘܝ,
 ܘܠܨܘܢܐ ܡܨܠܘܬܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ,
 ܘܡܨܠܐ ܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ,
 ܘܡܨܠܐ ܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ,
 ܘܡܨܠܐ ܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ ܘܡܨܠܐ.

⁶⁹ In other words, he did not speak with eloquence.

⁷⁰ *Life of Patriarch Sabrišū'*, 296–298.

Therefore, he prayed for them, also because he knew that without a clear sign the madness of their evil would not be defeated. He did not want to hurt them since he had learned from his master to show love toward those who hate their souls. Therefore, he sat down [on the ground] outside their village and invited a blow that would calm their wildness. He did not lower his head toward the floor. At that very moment, a wind arose for his sake. A very strong and harsh storm mixed with heavenly fire descended upon them and eliminated most of the houses because of its strength. The storm burned all livestock along with the palm trees and other trees of that village, and the effect of the blow also reached other villages in its vicinity. In addition to animals, it also burnt many palms trees in the other villages. Because of that, the news of his miracle spread to the ends of the earth and to all nations.⁷¹

The victory over Satan, his worship, and his plan to destroy the Christian churches in Radan occurred thanks to the efforts of the saint. This became an example of how strong faith can overcome difficulties and persecution, and Patriarch Iṣū'yhab used it in addressing the local church in Kirmān and Fars. *The Life of Patriarch Sabriṣū'* and his activity in Radan echoes the letter of Iṣū'yhab to Šem'un of Fars, as we shall soon see.

A POSITIVE IMAGE OF THE ARABS

After narrating the miracle of the scorching storm against the pagans of the village of Ša'd in Radan, the *Life of Saint Sabriṣū'* narrates the story of the healing of Nu'mān the son of Nebaioth, son of Ishmael, king of the "barbarian" Arabs of Ḥirā. According to this hagiographical narration, King Nu'mān converted to Christianity along with his entire household after Saint Sabriṣū' defeated the heretics in a debate in the presence of the king himself. After that, the author of the hagiography lists the good deeds of Nu'mān toward the Christians and their churches, through his generous donations:

⁷¹ Ibid., 297–298.

وسبح سلا وربكاه وصبرعا عند هذينعه وجده لنا
 وحلمك هذوا، انما اننا كحللبريسك ووكلمه طلا ذنه صعبنا.
 وانحن صعلقا مدهمعيلا صعبنا مدهمعيلا وجده سلا مدها
 ومقصهنا هذنا، سوانحن انى وناوننا انبى ذنه، سوانحن
 صعبنا كاهصصنه مصلنا، صى لا اهلنا سنا ك
 حلنا ان ك سوان، فمى صعبنا، وكه وصعبنا صب لبتنا
 كصقب اننا صعبنا، كصعبنا بعلاصم. هذنا مدها، انبى
 فتمبه لكنا صب سوان ومصعبنا، صب سلا وهذوا، وحرىقاها
 وهذنا هذنا، ارلى، سحلبسه وهذنا مصعبنا انى، ذنه،
 سحقبه لىمنا، اهلنا. هذنا، صلبنا وصال ك
 حذبنا وها وهذوا صب مصعبنا ملى. سناصبنا مدها،
 ذنه، سحقبنا، سحقبنا، سحقبنا، كنه صلبنا. سنا
 سبال وكنا حذنا صلبنا، مصعبنا ومصعبنا ولبتنا
 سحقبنا سحقبنا. سحقبنا مدها صبنا، سناصبنا سنا
 ولصعبنا صلبنا. صى صلبنا سنا، سنا صلبنا سنا
 لاننا مصلنا صلبنا، انبى صلبنا ولبتنا، وفترا كنه
 مقبنا. سنا مدها هذنا صلبنا، كصعبنا ولبنا، صلبنا
 فتمبه. انحن صلبنا، سنا سلا وربكاه، وهنا
 حنا واهذوا صلبنا انى، سحلبنا مصعبنا.

Then, the power of Saint *Mari Sabrišū*'s prayer, that he made throughout the night for the sake of the truth, stood victorious against the opposition, thanks to the most expert [fighter, i.e. the saint]. He secretly inspired the faithful king with correct knowledge of the true faith and about those who are rightly holding to it and those who wickedly hide themselves from it. He [King Nu'mān] did not need more appeals or clarifications, but instantly commanded that all the deceivers, the ones clothed in falsehood, be hunted down in his camp to be killed by the sword. In that same moment, they [the heretics] were like bats of the night who fled from the brightness of the sun and the power of the truth which radiated through the prayers of Lord

Sabrīšūʿ and shone through the zeal of Lord Šemʿūn.⁷² They [the heretics] hid themselves in the caves of their deceptions, while he [King Nuʿmān] had his servants weave for the heroes a crown of victory over the leader of the rebellion. They [the orthodox party] baptized the king as well as his wives, his children, and all his household. There was great joy in all the Church because of the baptism of Nuʿmān, the king of the Ṭayayē [Arabs] and all his forces. Nuʿmān the king gave the command, and they destroyed the idol of his misguided worship which is named ʿŪzzah. It had been erected to Aphrodite, the one on fire with adultery, a folly resulting from the wicked immorality of the Greeks. He [the king] offered them all his gold and precious gems to cover the expenses of the church that he was building. These benefits occurred because of the power of the prayers of this miracle-working man in all the countries and among all the nations.⁷³

In this narrative, the Arabs of Ḥīrā and their king Nuʿmān are presented with sympathy. Nuʿmān, the king of the Arabs, is hailed and described as the descendent of Nebaioth son of Ishmael son of Abraham, and even before his conversion and baptism he was described as a faithful king. In this event, Satan was again defeated and eliminated, while the Arabs were praised for their financial and spiritual support of the Church, even though were “barbarians”.

Išūʿyhab was aware of the story of the conversion of King Nuʿmān and his good deeds toward the Christians and their churches and monasteries, as he was aware of the *Life* of his contemporary Sabrīšūʿ, composed by his confrère Peter of Beth ʿAbē. The good deeds of King Nuʿmān toward the Christians became an example with which Išūʿyhab could compare the deeds of the Muslim Arabs of his day, “to whom God has given rule over the world, and who do not oppose Christianity, but they praise the Christian faith, honor the priests and the holy men of the Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries. And who were not to be blamed because of the

⁷² The bishop of Ḥīrā.

⁷³ *Life of Patriarch Sabrīšūʿ*, 326–328.

denial of faith in Mazūn, which is made clear by the same people of Mazūn who themselves admit that the Arabs have not forced them to abandon their faith, but only asked them to give up the portion of their possession and to keep their faith.”⁷⁴

Indeed, the parallels between Iṣū‘yhab’s Letter 14C and the *Life of Saint Sabrīšū‘* can be laid out in considerable detail. Iṣū‘yhab compares the strong faith that overcomes difficulties such as occurred in the past in Radan and Ḥīrā during the time of saint Sabrīšū‘, to the weak faith that results in defeat and destruction such as happened in Fars, Kirmān, and Mazūn. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of miracles as the proof of faith in both the *Life of Patriarch Sabrīšū‘* and in the letters of Iṣū‘yhab. According to the *Life of Patriarch Sabrīšū‘*, the miracles are much better proof of the truth of the faith than any discussions or explanations of the theologians. The following table shows how Iṣū‘yhab followed the schema and outline of the *Life of Saint Sabrīšū‘*:

Table No. 4

The <i>Life of Patriarch Sabrīšū‘</i>	Iṣū‘yhab, <i>Ep. 14C</i>
The activity of Sabrīšū‘ took place mostly in the patriarchal territory: Beth Aramayē (pp. 289, 294–297, 311, 320–328).	Iṣū‘yhab refers to the life and deeds of the saints in his patriarchal territory “in our small territories...,” which correspond to Beth Aramayē.
“The news of his glory shone in the world to the leaders and rulers, to the rich and poor, like a sudden lightning” (p. 296)	Because of the life of the saints in the patriarchal territory (Beth Aramayē), “the glory of Christianity is shining with a splendor because of them.”
Radan with its surrounding region was a pagan stronghold and battlefield between the Devil and Sabrīšū‘ (pp. 289, 294–297, 311).	Radan was a pagan stronghold and battlefield between the Devil and the saints.

⁷⁴ *Ep. 14C. 251.*

The miracles are the manifestation of the power of God and the weapons of the saints (p. 297)	The miracles are the manifestation of the power of God and the weapons of the saints
The Devil was defeated by Sabrīshū‘ in Radan and the surrounding regions (pp. 297–298)	The Devil was defeated by the saints in Radan
The Devil was shamed and mocked (pp. 297–298)	The Devil was humiliated and ridiculed
The Devil failed to deceive the pagans in Radan (pp. 298, 299–300)	The Devil failed to deceive the pagans in Radan
The Devil failed to destroy the Christian churches in Radan (p. 298)	The Devil failed to destroy the Christian churches in Radan
“Not only the children of the faith were amazed by his conduct of life which was granted from the merciful and compassionate Lord, but also the pagans and the Jews were amazed by the power that he possessed.” (p. 296)	Even the pagans were amazed by the saints’ power
The idolatric places of worship were uprooted (p. 298)	The idolatric places of worship were uprooted
The Devil vanished from the region of Radan	The Devil left Radan and appeared in Fars and Kirmān
The Arabs praised the Christian faith (pp. 322–323)	The Muslim Arabs “not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith.”
The Arabs were generous toward the Christian churches, monasteries, and clergy by helping them in building their churches (p. 327)	The Muslim Arabs “honor our priests and holy men of Our Lord and give aid to the churches and monasteries.”

Here again, Iṣū‘yhab uses a method of compare and contrast. He arranges the events in the “southern part of the world” and Radan

according to how the two things are alike and at the same time different from one another. If the reader is familiar with one topic, the writer can compare or contrast it with the topic to shed light upon it.

In his Letter 14C, Patriarch Iṣū'yahb presents the destruction of the churches in Fars and Kirmān as part of a persecution which on many occasions occurred in Persia as the result of the symbiotic relationship between Zoroastrianism and the Persian state. In contrast to this, according to Iṣū'yahb, the Arabs were not the oppressors, but only demanded taxes as part of any ruling power's policy. The Muslim Arabs in return praised the Christian faith, respected the monks, and financially helped the churches and the monasteries—as the Arabs had done also in the past. Furthermore, Iṣū'yahb uses a specific historical image of a saintly patriarch, that of Sabrišū', to give the hope that capturing the heart and the mind of the conquerors i.e., the Muslim Arabs, might be possible—as it had occurred in the past with the Arabs of Ḥīrā. Iṣū'yahb draws the attention of his readers to a hagiographical source that emphasized the conversion to Christianity of the king of all Arab tribes and his household, and their financial support for the monasteries and churches, all of which occurred as a result of the saint's zeal and miracle-working power.

Patriarch Iṣū'yahb appears to be taking the *Life of Patriarch Sabrišū'* as a kind of mirror in which he sees his own aspirations as patriarch as well as his hopes for a faith that can defeat the demons. In reading the *Life of Patriarch Sabrišū'*, Iṣū'yahb saw the Arabs of his own days as those of Ḥīrā, the descendants of Abraham through Ishmael. The story of how King Nu'mān, king of all the Arabs, was converted with the entirety of his household to Christianity provided hope that the Arabs of Iṣū'yahb's days would follow their example.

The echo of the *Life of Patriarch Sabrišū'* in Letter 14C is one example of a narrative-pattern in Iṣū'yahb's correspondence in which he uses allusions and references to people, places, or events from the past outside of the text at hand. He tries to enrich his letters by bringing in additional links for the reader from the same geographical context or in direct relationship with the historical frame of his letters' recipients. Such allusions are made so that the reader recalls a meaningful and archetypal figure that inspires a moral and religious response.

For example, to rebuke a group of monks in Mount Izlā because of their quarrelling and agitation with each other, Iṣū'yhab reminds them, in his Letter 17B, of the good memory of great monastic leaders in the Church of the East: Abraham of Kaškar *the Just*, Dadišū' *the righteous*, and Babay *the victorious* who established monasticism in Mount Izlā.⁷⁵ And to encourage a Nestorian secular leader named Yazdnan to stand against the heretics in his region, Iṣū'yhab reminds him, in his Letter 43B, of his late father's commitment to and support of faith.⁷⁶ To rebuke a group of monks in his diocese of Nineveh and to inspire them to resist the heretics, Iṣū'yhab, in his Letter 48B, reminds them of their spiritual and corporeal forefathers who defended their faith against the heretics, such as Bishop Šem'ūn the martyr, as well Bishop Qamišū' who spent great efforts against heathenism.⁷⁷ Similarly, rebuking and advising Bishop Sahdūnā of Maḥūzē d'Aryūn, Iṣū'yhab, in his Letter 7M, brings up the memory of two bishops from the past who served in the same location and who struggled against the heretics. He mentions, first, a certain bishop of the town who was abandoned by the heretics in the desert so that he would die from thirst or be eaten by wild animals. He also mentions another bishop of the town who was dropped into the river that passes in the midst of the town so that he would drown. The latter at least, was saved miraculously.⁷⁸ Also, to encourage a certain bishop to be firm in his stand against the heretics, Iṣū'yhab, in his Letter 8M, mentions the miracle that occurred in Nineveh when he was still bishop, and how the heretics were defeated.⁷⁹ And as we saw in Chapter Three, while rebuking Bishop Jacob of Šahrazūr and encouraging him to resist the Zoroastrians of his region, Iṣū'yhab, in his Letter 7C, refers to Bishop Nathanael of Šahrazūr, the martyr, who fought against the destruction of his churches and who at the end was crucified. Finally, in order to raise the spirits

⁷⁵ *Ep.* 17B. 23.

⁷⁶ *Ep.* 43B. 78.

⁷⁷ *Ep.* 48B. 94–96.

⁷⁸ *Ep.* 7M. 136–137.

⁷⁹ *Ep.* 8M. 139–140.

and the morale of the monks of Mount Izlā, Iṣū'yahb again recalls, in his Letter 8C, the great monastic fathers in the East: Abraham of Kaškar, Dadišū', and Babay and their efforts in fighting the heretics and establishing the monastic life in the East.⁸⁰

For Iṣū'yahb, well-chosen references or allusions to the saints of the past are part of his rhetorical arsenal which he uses to exhort, encourage, or shame the recipients of his letters.

CONCLUSION

Iṣū'yahb believed that God was the one who gave the Muslim Arabs dominion on earth and that this dominion would be a temporary phase of mastery over the world. However, he did not limit himself to the experience of his church through the centuries, which was never the church of a state or supported by a state power. Iṣū'yahb's remarks regarding the Muslim Arabs were aimed at convincing the members of his church that the Muslim conquest had nothing threatening for them. But not only that. Iṣū'yahb saw the Muslim Arabs as creating an opportunity for Christianity to fill the vacuum created in the region by the fall of Persia and the weakening of their Zoroastrian religion. Iṣū'yahb saw the outwardly positive position of Muslims toward the Christian faith, their fundamental belief in fearing God, and their good will toward Christianity as the same as that of the Arabs in pre-Islamic times. All of these were, for Iṣū'yahb, signs that a change and a chance were available to those who had the zeal of saints such as Sabrīšū' who knew how to harvest available opportunities.

⁸⁰ *Ep.* 8C. 238–239.

CONCLUSION

This study has re-examined Išū'yahb's letters, focusing on his view of and attitude toward the Muslim Arabs, a subject that intersects with other topics such as monasticism, church polity, church-state relationships, hagiography, and theology.

REASSESSMENT OF THE CHRONOLOGY

We have re-examined the letters of Išū'yahb in relation to their chronological order, especially the letters that were attributed in the manuscript to the period of his bishopric between 628/9 to 639/40. I propose that Jean Maurice Fiey and other scholars who followed his proposals were too hasty in rearranging the chronological order of the letters as found in the manuscript, specifically those that mention the Muslim Arabs as the secular rulers of the day. A study of the progression of Išū'yahb's activity as bishop at Nineveh, according to his letters and according to other historical sources, has allowed us to develop a chronological timeframe that supports the chronology implied in the manuscript. In other words, letters 39B, 43B, 44B, 46B, 48B, and 49B, composed during Išū'yahb's bishopric, do indeed refer to the Muslim Arabs. This means that the letters of the first stage of Išū'yahb's career, that is, his years as a bishop, are relevant to understanding his view of the Muslim Arabs. This study concludes that Išū'yahb's relationship with the Muslim Arabs was not limited to two stages of his episcopal career, as most previous studies have claimed, but spanned three stages of his career: as a bishop, as a metropolitan, and as a patriarch. The advance that this study makes is that the focus on Išū'yahb's view of the Muslim Arabs is based on a larger chronological spectrum, which allows us to see the development of Išū'yahb's view in stages over time.

COMPREHENSIVE AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF IŠŪ'YAHB'S DEVELOPING VIEW OF THE MUSLIM ARABS

Išū'yahb's early reaction to the Muslim Arabs echoes throughout the letters that were written during his bishopric at Nineveh. In these letters we observe that Išū'yahb viewed the Arab invasion between 633 and 637 in a negative way. Išū'yahb saw the Arab invasion as a difficult event that disturbed the stability of the world. He saw the Jacobites as the main beneficiaries from this chaos. However, the sentiment of dislike toward the invaders is adjusted in Išū'yahb's letters after the conquest of Tikrīt and Nineveh in 637. Bishop Išū'yahb was a pragmatic person who rapidly realized the reality of the new political and military situation in Iraq; he therefore approached the Muslim Arabs in such a way as to persuade them to his side. According to his letters, Išū'yahb's approach was based on theological/religious tactics. He aligned his belief with the belief of the Muslim Arab rulers by emphasizing the divine power and its impassibility, taking advantage of the difference between what the Muslim Arabs believed and what the Jacobites were teaching (that is, that "God died"), hoping that the Muslim Arabs would gradually turn their backs on the "heretics" because of their *shameful beliefs*.

The attitude of Išū'yahb toward the Muslim Arabs improved during his metropolitanate through a tactical approach based on theological similarity (in contrast to the Jacobites in his diocese) and on establishing good relationships with the Muslim Arabs at a political level. Išū'yahb sought good relationships with the Muslim Arabs to avoid the negative effects of the political vacuum that was created in the region after the fall of the Persians. However, the efforts to establish good relationships between the Church and the Muslim Arabs instigated a reaction by the Zoroastrians against the Christians, with the support of what was left of the Sasanid ruling power. The Zoroastrians saw the Christians as opportunists trying to take advantage of the rise of the Muslim Arabs for their own agenda. Išū'yahb III as patriarch raised the level of collaboration and fostered good relationships with the Muslim Arabs when he portrayed the new ruling power as being "God-fearing." He emphasized the term "God-fearing" to describe the religious and political situation of the "new era" which followed the fall of the Persians. In this "new era," according to Patriarch Išū'yahb III, God stands alone as the One and

Almighty God on earth and in heaven, contrary to false gods or demons. With the terms “God-fearing” and “God-fearers,” a wider religious-political spectrum was being promoted. The Muslim Arabs’ conquest inaugurated a new era in which the name of God was proclaimed and idolatries rejected. Patriarch Iṣū’yahb III sought the enforcement of his faith over the “heretics” and “pagans” (even by means of violence) in this “new era” of which he saw himself a part.

His very positive attitude toward the Muslim Arabs and his enthusiasm about the “new era” came under criticism when a large part of the Christians in Mazūn abandoned their faith due to the policies of the Muslim Arabs; the patriarch then had to justify his vision and policy. The patriarch justified his position with regard to what occurred in Mazūn by blaming the religious leaders of the local Christian communities in Fars and East Arabia for the losses and weakness of Christianity in that part of the world. Patriarch Iṣū’yahb presented the destruction of the churches in Fars and Kirmān as part of a persecution (which had on many occasions occurred in Persia) as the result of the symbiotic relationship between Zoroastrianism and the Persian state. In contrast to this, according to Iṣū’yahb, the Arabs were not the oppressors; they only demanded taxes as part of any ruling power’s policy. The Muslim Arabs in return praised the Christian faith, respected the monks, and helped the churches and the monasteries financially—as they had also done in the past.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAGIOGRAPHY AND A SPECIFIC HAGIOGRAPHICAL TEXT IN IṢŪ’YHAB’S VIEW OF THE MUSLIM ARABS

The *Life of Sabriṣū’* is an important intertext for Iṣū’yahb, as we see in his deployment of it in his Letter 14C. Iṣū’yahb makes use of the *Life of Sabriṣū’* in that letter in order to telegraph the concept that a strong faith will result in the performance of miracles, overcome persecutions, attain the support of political power, and convert pagans and their rulers to Christianity—as had occurred with the Arabs of Ḥīrā. Therefore, the *Life of Sabriṣū’* and his activity among the Arabs in Radan and al-Ḥīrā was highlighted in Letter 14C. He retold his audience a popular story in a contemporary context. Iṣū’yahb used a specific historical image of a saintly patriarch, Sabriṣū’, to give the hope that capturing the hearts and minds of the conquerors (the

Muslim Arabs) was possible—as had occurred in the past (with the Arabs of Ḥīrā). Iṣū'yahb drew the attention of his readers to a hagiographical source that emphasized the event of the conversion of the king of all Arab tribes and his household to Christianity, and their financial support for the monasteries and churches, all of which occurred as a result of the saint's zeal and miracle-working power. In this story, he found an opportunity to point to the idea that a faith accompanied by miraculous deeds was stronger than theological discourse, and that establishing good rapport with the governing authorities was possible for charismatic and zealous people. Collaborating with the Arabs could be beneficial, as it had been in the past, as the Arabs had performed good deeds and had good characteristics even while pagan. Patriarch Iṣū'yahb III emphasized the good deeds of the Arabs in the past toward the Christians, their monks and priests, and their churches and monasteries. For example, he alluded to the portrayal of Nu'mān, the king of the Arabs and the descendant of Ishmael the son of Abraham, who was known for his good treatment of Christians and his conversion to Christianity. Patriarch Iṣū'yahb III tells his people that the Arabs in general are close to Christians, sharing the same Abrahamic heritage. He appears to have hoped that the Arabs would be on their way to conversion to Christianity, given, first, their belief in God (and thus establishing a “new era” of God-fearing); and second, their God-fearing deeds. Patriarch Iṣū'yahb appears to be taking the *Life of Sabrīšū'* as a kind of mirror in which he sees his own aspirations as a patriarch as well as his hopes for a faith that can defeat the demons. In reading the *Life of Sabrīšū'*, Iṣū'yahb saw the Arabs of his own days as those of Ḥīrā, the descendants of Abraham through Ishmael. The story of how King Nu'mān, king of all the Arabs, was converted with the entirety of his household to Christianity gave hope that the Arabs of Iṣū'yahb's days would follow their example.

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