

The Syrian Rite of Antioch



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SYRIAN RITE

The Syrian rite, although originating in Jerusalem and referred to by St. Cyril († 387) in the *Catecheses*, is essentially connected with Antioch, the traditional residence of St. Peter before his departure for Rome.

History

Antioch (Antakieh) was founded about three hundred years before the Christian era by Seleucus Nikator, a general of Alexander the Great, and it remained under the Seleucides until the Roman conquest. Then, as the capital of Syria and the residence of the imperial legate, the city earned the name of the "Queen of the East." The three languages on the title of the cross were spoken by its inhabitants—Latin for administrative purposes, Greek for literature and culture, and Syriac by the natives of the suburbs and country districts.

The Christian community of Antioch was the most ancient after that of "holy Sion, the mother of all the churches," and it was here that the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians."¹

According to Eusebius († ab. 340),² St. Peter became *ἐπίσκοπος* of Antioch in the fourth year after the Ascen-

¹ "ita ut cognominarentur primum Antiochiaec discipuli, Christiani." *Actus Apost.* XI, 26.

² *Hist. Eccl.*, III, 36; cf. ORIGEN († 254), *Hom. VI in Lucam*.

sion of our Lord. "Antioch," says Pope St. Innocent I (ab. 402-417), "was the first see of the first Apostle," although St. Ignatius († ab. 107), the successor of St. Evodius, who was appointed by St. Peter himself, in a letter to the Romans writes "Bishop of Syria," not "Bishop of Antioch."

With the destruction of Jerusalem (70), the city was without a rival as the metropolis of Christianity in the East, and later, when Antioch had become a patriarchate, claimed jurisdiction over Syria, Phoenicia, Arabia, Palestine, Cilicia, Cyprus and Mesopotamia. The council of Nicea (325)³ agreed that the privileges of the church of Antioch should be maintained; while the first council of Constantinople (381)⁴ declared the jurisdiction of its bishop to be coterminous with the civil province of the Orient, the easternmost outpost of the Roman Empire. In the 5th century, Antioch, although still next in rank to Rome and Alexandria, suffered an eclipse. The council of Ephesus (431) acknowledged the church of Cyprus to be autocephalous, and the council of Chalcedon (451) sanctioned a patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Schism

A more serious blow, however, was to fall upon the church of Antioch than any curtailment of privileges, and the heresies of Nestorius and Eutyches, or rather of James Baradaeus, changed the one great Church in peace and communion with the Apostolic See into three mutually hostile religions,—Orthodox (Melkite), Nestorian and Monophysite (Jacobite). The Orthodox Church remained a constituent part of the Catholic Church of Christ until the schism of

³ Canon 6.

⁴ Canon 2.

Constantinople and the vicissitudes of the Nestorians will be considered in another place, but a word is necessary in explanation of Monophysism, which, after disturbing the peace and harmony of the Eastern Empire for two centuries, finally became the instrument for the formation of four national churches.⁵

The Catholics of the Syrian rite are converts from the Jacobites or their descendents.

Nestorianism⁶ was condemned by the council of Ephesus, but, as a revulsion against this heresy, certain of the clergy fell into the opposite error, maintaining that the sacred humanity of our Lord was as a drop of wine in an ocean of water, so that in all things—personality and nature—he was inseparably one. Monophysites and Nestorians admitted the same false premise, that person (*ὑπόστασις*) and nature (*φύσις*) were identical. The name *Μονοφυσίτης*⁷ or *Μονοφυσισμός* thus came to be given to those who denied the two natures in Christ.

The first home of the heresy was Egypt, where Dioscorus of Alexandria came to be recognised as the leader. The influence of Eutyches, however, was small, as he had ventured to attack St. Cyril, the Coptic hero, for his agreement with John of Antioch,—“because Jesus Christ is one, although the difference of natures, indelibly united, may not be ignored.”

Christology afforded a convenient excuse for both Egypt and Syria in their quarrels with the emperor, and politics came to be as much a cause of schism⁸ as an erroneous

⁵ Coptic; Ethiopic; Jacobite; Armenian.

⁶ Chapter VIII.

⁷ *μονή φύσις*, “one nature.”

⁸ Imperial politicians perverted national feeling into religious dissension.

belief touching the Incarnation, although Monophysism in Syria never developed into a national cause of the whole country, such as we find in Egypt.

A crisis was reached about the year 448, when Domnus, patriarch of Antioch, accused Eutyches of teaching Apollinarianism.⁹ The heretical archimandrite was deposed in synod and excommunicated; while a document to that effect was signed by about thirty bishops, including Julian of Cæs, the representative of the pope at the court of Theodosius. The matter was brought before the Robber council of Ephesus,¹⁰ which acquitted the defendant, and also before the council of Chalcedon. Eutyches appealed to the pope (St. Leo)¹¹ in apparent filial humility: "I requested that this might be made known to your holiness, and that you might judge as you should think fit, declaring that in every way I should follow that which you approve." St. Leo charitably put forward the plea that ignorance had been the cause of the heresy, but the offending monk remained intractable.

An appeal for support was also sent by Eutyches to St. Peter Chrysologus,¹² bishop of Ravenna († ab. 450), who, however, declined to give an opinion in what was the concern of the pope. Pope St. Leo (440-461) had already

⁹ Apollinaris, bishop of Laodicea († ab. 392), taught that our Lord had no human intellect and that his flesh was of one substance with his divinity, brought with him from heaven, so that God the Son actually died on the cross. In effect the heresy deprived our Lord both of humanity and divinity.

¹⁰ *σύνοδος ληστρική; Latrocinium Ephesinum.*

¹¹ *Epist. XXI.*

¹² "*Quoniam beatus Petrus qui in propria sede et vivit et praesidet, praestat quaerentibus fidei veritatem; nos enim pro studio pacis et fidei, extra consensum Romanae civitatis episcopi, causas fidei audire non possumus.*"

sent his dogmatic tome to Flavian, orthodox archbishop of Constantinople (447-449), a document which had defined the faith of the Church on the disputed points, and one which had called forth the famous affirmation at Chalcedon: "Peter has spoken by Leo." Submission, however, was by no means general, and Dioscorus of Alexandria presided at the herodox gathering at Ephesus, where Flavian was so maltreated by the heretical soldiery that he died a few days later. The legates of the pope, who held a "watching brief" at the assembly, cried out their protest of *Contradicitur*, and left in disgust.

Dioscorus had the temerity to "excommunicate" the pope, a proceeding which the bishops at Chalcedon referred to in a letter to St. Leo: "the enemy like a beast roaring to himself outside the fold had stretched his madness even towards you, to whom the care of the vineyard was given by the Saviour, that is, as we say, against your holiness, and has conceived an excommunication against you, who hasten to unite the body of the Church."

The council of Chalcedon (451) was made possible by the accession to the imperial throne in the previous year of the orthodox Pulcheria and her consort Marcian, who endeavoured by every means in their power to reverse the heretical policy of Theodosius II, their predecessor (408-450). The papal legate, Paschasinus, bishop of Lilybaeum (Sicily), acted as president, and in opening the council declared that "the instructions of the most blessed and apostolic bishop of Rome forbid us to sit here in company with Dioscorus, archbishop of Alexandria."

St. Anatolius of Constantinople occupied the place of honour after the Roman delegates, although the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch should have been preferred before

the patriarch of New Rome.¹³ The Tome of St. Leo was declared to express the true doctrine, that in Christ there are two natures, "without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation."¹⁴

Thus, the faith was safeguarded against Monophysism on the one hand and Nestorianism on the other.

An apologetic treatise, written in the 9th century by Elias, Jacobite patriarch of Antioch, shows clearly that the teaching¹⁵ of the Monophysites was in opposition to that of Chalcedon, although they say that our Lord is perfect God and perfect man, and condemn Eutyches. They refuse, however, to admit the expression: "One person *in two natures*."¹⁶ Gregory Bar Hebraeus¹⁷ says that "one nature is double and not simple." Theirs is the verbal Monophysism of Severus of Antioch, which a recent book¹⁸ has claimed as "substantially not to be distinguished from orthodox doctrine."

Monophysism originated in Egypt, Syria and Palestine as a party within the Church, and one finds an orthodox bishop succeeded by a heretic and vice versa. It was only after some years that definite schismatic churches were established.

The history of the Monophysites in Syria is beyond the scope of the book, but some reference must be made to

¹³ Canon 28 of Chalcedon conferred the second place in Christendom on Constantinople, but, since the legates of the pope were absent, this canon forms no part of that which was enacted *conciliariter*.

¹⁴ ἐν δύο φύσεσιν ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαρέτως, ἀχωρίστως γνωριζόμενον.

¹⁵ *Unam Dei Verbi incarnati naturam in Christo post unionem, salvis proprietatibus, profitentur.*

¹⁶ μία ὑπόστασις ἐν δύο φύσεσιν

¹⁷ ASSEMANI, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, II, 297.

¹⁸ *Incontro ai Fratelli Separati di Oriente* (Roma, 1945), p. 82.

Severus, patriarch of Antioch (512-518), whom the *Catholic Encyclopedia*¹⁹ calls "the most famous and the most fertile of all the Monophysite writers."

He was acclaimed²⁰ "the excellent, clothed with light, occupant of the see of Antioch, who became a horn of salvation to the Orthodox (Monophysite) Church, and who sat upon the throne of the great Ignatius." Bar Hebraeus, the 13th century canonist, spoke of him as "the holy Severus, scorning life and despising glory." In 538 Severus died in exile in Egypt. External pressure and interior schism seemed to point to the end of the heresy, but an unexpected champion arose in James Baradaeus, the virtual founder of the Jacobite church.²¹

About this time, Pope Vigilius (537-555) showed a weakness unbecoming in one whose duty was to feed the sheep and the lambs of Christ. It would appear that he largely owed his position as Supreme Pontiff to the empress Theodora, who had been given to understand that her "protégé" would make concessions in favour of Monophysism. There is, of course, no question that Vigilius compromised the faith of the Church, but his spirit of vacillation estranged many of his flock. On November 20, 545, as he was saying Mass in the Transtiberian basilica of St. Cecilia, Vigilius, on the order of the emperor Justinian, was dragged from the altar and transported to Constantino-

¹⁹ Art. *Monophysites*, vol. X, p. 490.

²⁰ Severus of AL-USHMUNAIN, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic of Alexandria*, ed. B. Evetts (*Patrol. Orient.* I, 449); ap. Adrian FORTESCUE, *Lesser Eastern Churches*, chap. X, p. 325, n. 6.

²¹ Since about the 8th century, the term "Jacobite" has been applied to the West Syrian church, by reason of the prominent position occupied by James Baradaeus. Bar Hebraeus knows and admits this name (*Chron. Eccl.* I, 218).

Jacobite, *Ya'kuby*, (plural) *Ya'akyba*.

ple. Later, he was permitted to return to Rome, but, worn out with his trials, the pope died at Syracuse (June 555).

The Syrian church as a distinctive and schismatic entity may be said to date from the consecration in prison of two bishops by Theodosius, the imprisoned Monophysite patriarch of Alexandria, who had been instigated by the empress Theodora, probably in 543. The new prelates were Theodore for Bosra and the South and James Baradaeus for Edessa and the East. At the time of the consecration, says John of Ephesus, there were only two or three other Monophysite bishops who were out of prison, but James,²² who had been a disciple of Severus, infused new life into the flagging heresy, and for nearly 40 years he journeyed the length and breadth of Syria.

James is said to have made two patriarchs of Antioch,²³ from whom the present Jacobite hierarchy is descended; twenty-seven bishops; and over two thousand priests and deacons. The name Baradaeus²⁴ was derived from the ragged cloak in which this apostle of heresy was wont to travel. He died in 578 as the undisputed leader of the Monophysite church, but he has left little in the way of writing beyond a liturgy and a few letters.

The Coming of the Arabs

When in 633 Syria was overrun by Moslem Arabs, the Jacobites, partly on the score of their hostility to the Greeks and partly by reason of their usefulness to the conquerors,

²² *Ya'kub Burd'ōyō; Burd'ōnō.*

²³ The first of the line of the Jacobite patriarchs was Paul of Beith Ukamin, who was consecrated by James Baradai in 543 or 544.

²⁴ *Barda'thō*, "coarse horse-cloth;" *bard'ūnā*, "mule;" Greek, *ἰάκβος τζάντζαλος*.

received preferential treatment. Under the Sofianid Omayyad dynasty from Medina, Syria for the first and only time became a great nation.

Christianity was free, and the architecture of the Syrians flourished under the name of "Arabesque;" while the Monophysites filled all the civil posts of importance.

Change of dynasty, however, brought disaster to the church of Syria, and by the 9th century the Christians, irrespective of race or belief, were ill-treated and persecuted.

In the face of the common enemy, the emperor Nicephorus Phocas (913-969) proposed a union of the churches, and John Sarigta, the Jacobite patriarch, went for discussions to Constantinople. The scheme, however, came to nothing, and John was imprisoned by the Byzantines!

Relations with Rome in the Middle Ages

At the time of the Crusades, the Jacobites assisted the Christian cause, and from about the year 1140 there was a resident bishop in Jerusalem.²⁵ It has been suggested²⁶ that the Jacobite colony was originally composed of immigrants who came to the Holy City with King Baldwin, Count of Edessa, from 1098-1100. In 1169, Denys bar Salibi²⁷ sent an explanation of the Syrian liturgy to the Jacobite bishop of Jerusalem, in order that he might be well equipped to defend its authenticity and integrity against the criticisms of the Franks.

Philip, prior of the Dominicans in Palestine, wrote a letter to Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) in 1237, in which

²⁵ The title has since been merged in that of *mafrin*.

²⁶ George EVERY, *Syrian Christians in Palestine in the early Middle Ages. Eastern Churches Quarterly* (July-September, 1946), p. 365.

²⁷ ASSEMANI, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, t. II, p. 156.

he informed him that the Jacobite patriarch ²⁸ with a number of bishops and monks had arrived in Jerusalem, where they had abjured their heresy and promised obedience to the pope. The rejoicing, however, was premature, as the reconciliations had been prompted by fear of a Tartar invasion, and they later returned to heresy.

About the year 1247, the patriarch Ignatius III admitted the supremacy of the Apostolic See, and the mafrian bar Ma'dan spoke of Rome as the "mother and head of all the churches."

Unfortunately, the declarations were again neither sincere nor lasting.

Bar Hebraeus, ²⁹ in the same century, drew attention to the presence in Jerusalem of seventy Jacobite monks.

From 1292-1495, the Jacobites seem to have been a prey to internal schisms, and despite the relative unimportance of their church ³⁰ there were no less than three distinct jurisdictions. ³¹

Hopes of the return of the Jacobites to Catholic unity were again entertained at the time of the council of Florence (1438-1445), and a decree (*Cantate Domino*) was promulgated on February 4, 1441, with a view to enlightening the dissident Syrians in the matter of Catholic christology.

Three years later, the patriarch Ignatius V sent Abdallah, archbishop of Edessa, as delegate to Rome, where in a congregation of cardinals and theologians named by the

²⁸ Ignatius III David Khaīšūmī (1237-1247) in the synod of Jerusalem.

²⁹ *Chron. Eccles.*, II, c. 653-4.

³⁰ The brother of the canonist described his coreligionists as "the small and weak people of the Jacobites."

³¹ Four rival patriarchs. A. FORTESCUE, *Lesser Eastern Churches*, chap. X, p. 333.

pope agreement was arrived at on the three disputed points—the procession of the Holy Spirit, the two natures in our Lord, and the two wills in our Lord. The Syrian delegate submitted to the decree of union (*Multa et admirabilia*) and made solemn declarations of orthodoxy, but in spite of this no practical consequences seem to have resulted.

In 1555, the patriarch Jacob IV sent a priest named Mussa to Rome, in order that he might get some books printed in Syriac. Mussa, on behalf of his people, made a profession of Catholic faith before Pope Julius III, but the reconciliation was repudiated by the Jacobite patriarch.

Bishop John Qacha, at the request of the patriarch Nehemetallah, went to Rome in 1560, and established union with the Apostolic See. The patriarch, however, got into difficulties both with his own people and the Turkish authorities. He became a Moslem, but filled with remorse at his apostasy he fled to Rome, where he died a good Catholic.

In 1583, Nehemetallah sent the envoy of the apostolic delegate to his brother and successor in the patriarchate, David, in the hope that he might be influenced in the matter of union, but the mission was without result.

The 17th century

The 17th century was more propitious for the cause of Catholicism in Syria. The Capuchins reconciled the majority of the Jacobites in Aleppo, and also the patriarch.

A Catholic bishop was appointed to Aleppo in 1656, in the person of Andrew Akhidjan, an alumnus of the college of Propaganda, and six years later (1662) he was nominated patriarch.³² A profession of faith was sent to Rome in 1665.

³² 1662-1677.

The dissidents, furious at the success of Catholicism, persuaded the Turkish government to adopt a hostile attitude, and the church at Aleppo was given to the Jacobites.

Mar Andrew, anxious for the Catholic succession, asked Peter, bishop of Jerusalem, who was known to have aspirations towards unity, to become patriarch. Unfortunately, Peter delayed going to Aleppo, and the Jacobites elected Abd-ul-Masih. The Catholic claimant, however, obtained the firman from Constantinople, as well as a confirmation of his appointment from Rome. Two bishops were consecrated, in order to make the succession certain, but opposition on the part of the Jacobites persisted. Peter was twice deposed, and finally went to Rome to obtain the help of the pope.

The 18th century

In 1700, a treaty between the emperor and the Turks brought about the reinstatement of the Catholic patriarch.

Further opposition was not long delayed, and some months later the patriarch Stephen, an archbishop and ten priests were imprisoned at Adana. The lower clergy were released in 1704, but two years later (1706) the bishops died in prison.³³

The 18th century was a difficult time for the Catholic Syrians, and the line of patriarchs was interrupted until 1783, in which year the patriarch adopted the title of Antioch in place of Aleppo. Some years previously, at an episcopal synod called by the Jacobite patriarch Gregory III, the archbishop of Aleppo, who had been secretly reconciled to the Catholic church, took the opportunity to make propaganda in favour of union. The bishop of Mosul returned

³³ The patriarch and three bishops are said to have died in prison. *Dict. de Théol. Cath.*, t. I, col. 1431.