

# INTRODUCTION

When people think of premodern Christianity, they most often think of Christianity as a European religion or—at the very least—as a religion of the Mediterranean. That is, they picture Christianity's early spread corresponding roughly to that of the ancient Roman Empire. So, too, when people think of classics of Christian literature, they most often envisage works written by authors such as Athanasius, Augustine, or Aquinas. That is, they consider texts originally composed in Greek and Latin.

Although this represents fairly well modern impressions of premodern Christianity, it is actually a poor representation of early Christians themselves. Throughout much of premodernity, the most geographically expansive church was not the Roman Catholic Church or the Byzantine Orthodox Church, but rather churches that reached from modern-day Turkey, throughout the Middle East, across Afghanistan, down to India, up to Tibet, and into China. For these churches, the primary language of Christian scholarship and liturgy was the *lingua franca* of the late ancient Middle East, a dialect of Aramaic known as Syriac.

Syriac Christians developed their own theological, ecclesiastical, and monastic traditions. They produced the earliest surviving Christian translations of the Bible. They composed the most extensive collections of ancient Christian poetry. They were the first Christians to encounter Islam. They were a crucial link in the translation and preservation of Greek science and philosophy. They formed an essential cultural bridge between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

For historians living in the twenty-first century, Syriac texts are among the most valuable sources surviving from the late ancient and medieval Middle East. Syriac Christianity had complex interactions with early Jewish communities that challenged a clearly demarcated boundary between church and synagogue. Speaking a form of Aramaic, just as Jesus himself had, these Christians shared roots with the Jewish, Roman, and Persian worlds, as well as that of early Christianity. As a result, Syriac Christians had an incredibly rich historiographical tradition, and Syriac texts provide extensive and unique coverage of the Byzantine and Persian empires. So, too, Syriac works form the earliest and largest corpus of contemporary, textual evidence of the first Islamic dynasty, and they document events throughout the ancient silk road routes and Central Asia.

So, why have so few in the twenty-first century heard of these Syriac churches? Owing to a series of ancient theological controversies, Syriac Christians ended up being considered heretics by the forerunners of Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant Christians. Because until recently the academic study of religion in Europe and the United States has been so closely tied to Catholic and Protestant theology, the combination of these Christians coming from the “wrong” place (that is, having relatively small American or European communities), having the “wrong” beliefs (that is, being considered heretics by Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians), and using the “wrong” language (consider how few even know the word “Syriac”) has meant that Syriac Christians have essentially been written out of history.

At universities this has started to change. Whether as a unit in “Introduction to Christianity,” a section of a survey course in church history, part of a class on the global Middle Ages, or as the focus of an upper-level seminar, select writings from Syriac Christians have begun to appear on undergraduate- and graduate-level syllabi. So, too, as a research field, Syriac studies has expanded exponentially; for example, more North American dissertations in Syriac Studies have been written in the last fifteen years than in the preceding 150 years combined.

But Syriac Christianity is not simply a subject of antiquarian interest. As a living tradition with over ten million modern practitioners, it is slowly coming to the attention of a wider public. Owing to ancient missionary movements, millions of modern Syriac Christians currently live in southern India. Until recently, millions of others remained in the lands of Syriac Christianity’s birth: modern-day Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and eastern Turkey. During the First World War, a genocide targeted Syriac Christians in the Ottoman Empire, killing between 250,000 and 500,000 of them, an event known among modern Syriac Christians as the *Sayfo* (sword). This was followed by periods of discrimination and persecution in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. The twenty-first century is not looking much better. The chaos following the second Iraq war decimated the Syriac churches in Iraq and led to massive emigration and dislocation. The civil war in Syria has been even more destructive to these communities and their patrimony. Their congregations have been targeted by Islamists; their churches

have been destroyed by the Islamic State movement; and their leaders have been kidnapped and killed.

As North America and Europe have become more aware of the plight of modern Syriac Christians, students, scholars, and the general public are increasingly interested in the history of Middle Eastern Christianity. As specialists in this branch of Christianity, the four of us have delivered dozens of public lectures about the Syriac tradition. Without fail, audience members ask us how they can learn more about the Syriac churches. In large part the impetus for this book arose from our inability to give a good answer. For, despite the ever-increasing interest in Syriac Christianity, most of the actual writings by Syriac Christians remain inaccessible to nonspecialists. No one has ever published a general, easily obtained, full-length anthology of Syriac texts in translation.

*Invitation to Syriac Christianity* is our attempt to help fill this gap. Until now, whenever professors wanted to include Syriac texts on their syllabi, modern Syriac Christians aspired to learn more about their heritage, graduate students wished to have Syriac Christianity as part of their studies, or the interested public desired to increase their knowledge of Middle Eastern Christianity, they needed to cobble together their own assortment of texts—a task for which few have the time or resources. The three years we spent selecting texts for this volume have not yielded a definitive compendium covering all the essentials of Syriac Christianity. But we have carefully curated this collection to serve as an entryway, an invitation into the Syriac tradition as well as a stimulus, we hope, for even further exploration.

We decided to organize the book thematically. This has the advantage of helping readers integrate Syriac sources into their existing frameworks of knowledge. For example, thematic organization allows one to choose more quickly texts for a new course syllabus or to explore more thoroughly how Syriac authors deal with a particular topic. But this schema has the disadvantage of giving little guidance concerning the chronological evolution of the Syriac tradition. So, especially for those who have a relatively light background in the history of Syriac Christianity, we wanted to provide as the center of the book's introduction a brief overview of some key events in the history of Syriac Christianity and its literature. Subsequent chapters, source descriptions, and texts will often allude to these developments.

## THE FIRST THROUGH FOURTH CENTURIES

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, likely to have originated in Edessa (modern-day Urfa), in what is now southeastern Turkey. Edessa was an ancient Mesopotamia city called Adma' which was captured and re-founded by the successors of Alexander the Great, the Seleucids, in 303 BCE. It became the capital of the small province of Osrhoene, created by the Persian Parthians after their defeat of the Greek Seleucids in 130/129 BCE. Local kings ruled Osrhoene until the Romans made it a province in 195 CE and an official colony around 213. Edessa was a caravan city on a trade route hosting a diverse array of

linguistic, cultural, and religious influences. How and when Christianity first arrived in Edessa is unknown, although legends from the fourth and fifth centuries claim that Jesus himself ordered his disciple Addai (or in Greek, Thaddeus) to evangelize the city at the invitation of its king, Abgar. Christians in and around Edessa spoke and wrote in Syriac. As these Christians moved further afield into Mesopotamia and eventually eastward as far as Persia, India, Central Asia, and China, Syriac spread with them. At the very least, we know that Syriac was one of the first languages, if not the first, into which the Christian Bible was translated.

Syriac is first attested in inscriptions in and around Edessa from 6 CE, and so predates Christianity's arrival. The presence of Syriac in a number of first through third-century pagan mosaics and a handful of legal documents also shows that non-Christians used Syriac. But apart from a few fragments, all surviving Syriac literature comes from Christian authors or has been transmitted by Christian scribes. Christian texts in Syriac appear in the second and third centuries, although it is impossible to obtain a clear picture because many of these texts are anonymous, of uncertain date and origin, and were perhaps not originally composed in Syriac. Take, for example, the *Odes of Solomon*, a collection of forty-two short lyric poems that have survived almost entirely in Syriac. The authorship, the exact date, and the place of origin remain unknown, although most scholars place them in the early second century. If they were originally composed in Syriac, then they may be the earliest known non-inscriptional Syriac text. But they do not conform to any known Syriac verse form, and there are good reasons to believe that some, if not all, of the *Odes* were originally written in Greek. Although clearly Christian and strongly influenced by biblical language, the theology of the *Odes* is difficult to piece together, as is the community for whom they were presumably composed. One scholar has even claimed them as writings of the Essene Jews in the mid first century CE, perhaps among some converts from that community to Christianity.

We know considerably more about another Christian poet from the second century, Bardaisan (d. 222). He was active in the Edessene court of King Abgar VIII (d. 212), and he played the part of poet, philosopher, and—according to the chronicler Julius

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FIGURE 1.

Syriac slave contract (*P. Euphrates* 6r). Owing to the relatively wet climate of Mesopotamia, very few Syriac papyri have survived. Nevertheless, three substantial Syriac parchments (sheets made from animal skin) dating from the third century were found around the cosmopolitan city Dura-Europos. They include one dated precisely to 243; this is a bill of sale for a slave written in Greek with a Syriac summary and signatures on the bottom and opposite side. In addition to its early date, there are several noteworthy features of this parchment. The date is given in multiple traditional systems, one of which starts with the colonization of Edessa by Rome in 212. Some of the signatures are in Greek, signifying the bilingual environment of Roman Mesopotamia. Finally, it mentions that a copy was placed in the archives of Edessa, signaling that both Syriac and Edessa were regionally significant and that Edessa's archives must have been extensive. Photo: Adam Bülow-Jacobsen.

Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely a medieval manuscript. The text is written on a single sheet of parchment, which is heavily damaged, torn, and stained. The script is dense and fills most of the page. The text is written in a cursive script, likely a medieval manuscript. The text is written on a single sheet of parchment, which is heavily damaged, torn, and stained. The script is dense and fills most of the page. The text is written in a cursive script, likely a medieval manuscript. The text is written on a single sheet of parchment, which is heavily damaged, torn, and stained. The script is dense and fills most of the page.

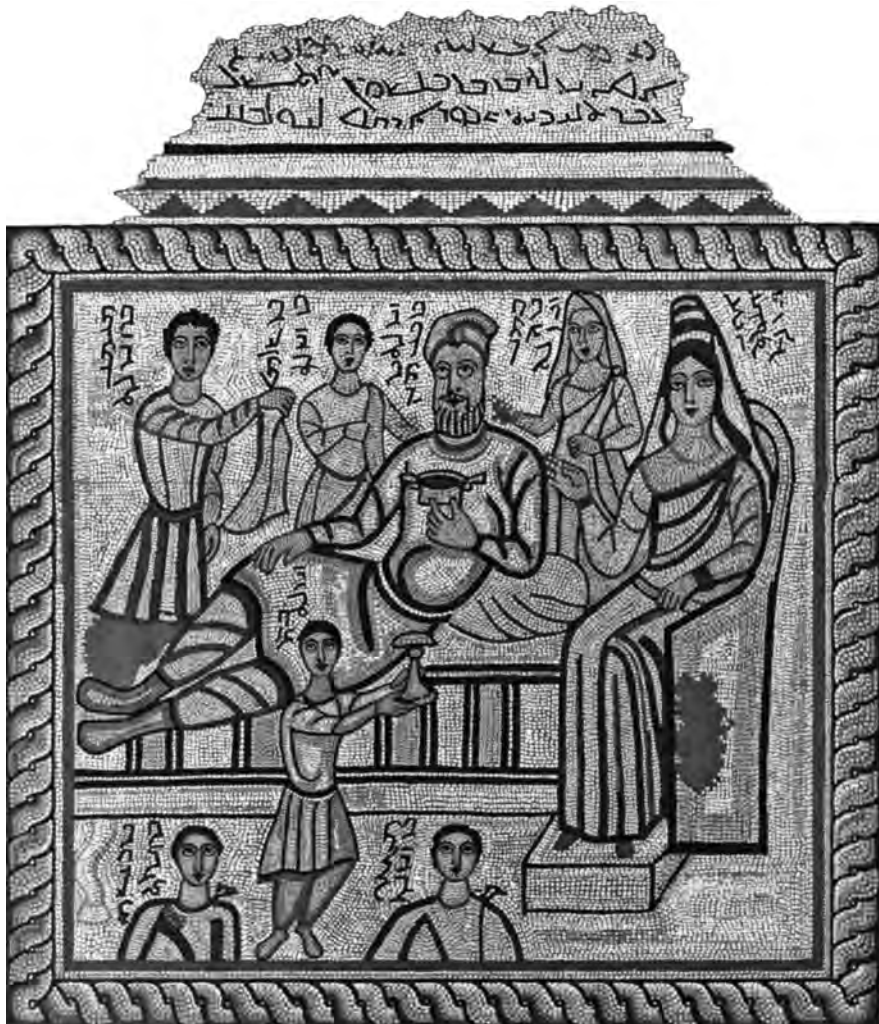


FIGURE 2.

Funerary couch mosaic. All surviving Syriac literature was either written or copied by Christians. But a number of early inscriptions, mosaics, and a handful of documentary sources (e.g., the slave contract in figure 1) attest to Syriac's use by non-Christians. Dated to ca. 278, this mosaic from southern Edessa was stolen in the late twentieth century. Our best record of it is a color drawing made in the mid-twentieth century. Note the names next to the figures written in Syriac. This mosaic depicts a recently deceased man surrounded by members of his family. Depictions of contemporary Edessans such as this are striking sources for understanding modes of dress and familial organization in pre-Christian Edessa. The survival of many such depictions of funerary couches from third-century Edessa suggests that the commemoration of the recently deceased through art was a fairly widespread practice. Photo by Mrs. Seton Lloyd from *The Dawn of Civilization: The First World Survey of Human Cultures in Early Times*, ed. Stuart Piggott (London: Thames & Hudson, 1961).





FIGURE 3.

Family portrait mosaic. As with the “Funerary couch mosaic,” the “Family portrait mosaic” was stolen and our only remnant is a color drawing made in the mid-twentieth century. Originally found in Edessa and dated between 228 and 278, the “Family portrait mosaic” is a valuable source for understanding non-Christian Syriac culture in late antiquity. The figures’ names and relations are written next to them in Syriac. The elaborate dress and hairstyles of the people suggest that this portrait depicts a noble family. The differing hats and hairstyles seem to mark different positions within the family and society more generally. Photo by Mrs. Seton Lloyd from *The Dawn of Civilization: The First World Survey of Human Cultures in Early Times*, ed. Stuart Piggott (London: Thames & Hudson, 1961).

Africanus, who met Bardaisan in 195—skilled archer. His own writings have unfortunately been lost, except for fragments quoted by later authors. But one of his students, Philip, has left us a philosophical dialogue on fate and freewill entitled *Book of the Laws of the Countries* (so named because of a long section on the “laws” or “customs” of different peoples), in which Bardaisan serves as the main character, much like Socrates in a Platonic dialogue. Bardaisan is reported to have articulated a speculative cosmology that was deemed heretical in retrospect and that almost certainly was influenced by Greek philosophy, and allegedly by Iranian and Gnostic cosmology as well. The *Book of the Laws*

*of the Countries* was translated into Greek as *On Fate*, attributed to Bardaisan himself, and is quoted in other early Christian sources. The case of Bardaisan suggests that Syriac Christianity in Edessa was originally quite cosmopolitan.

Bardaisan is often paired with his slightly older contemporary, Tatian (d. ca. 185). A pagan born in “Assyria,” and a self-described “barbarian philosopher,” Tatian traveled west to Rome in search of true philosophy. He converted to Christianity and was a disciple of the Christian philosopher Justin Martyr until the latter’s death, whereupon he is reported to have returned to the East in 170 to found his own school of philosophy somewhere in Mesopotamia. His single surviving philosophical work, *Oration to the Greeks*, is part savage indictment of everything Greek (written in Greek!), and part demonstration that Moses is more ancient than Homer. Later heresiologists associate Tatian with “encratism,” an extreme form of asceticism based on the total renunciation of human sexuality, an asceticism some scholars believe was popular in Syria in the second and third centuries. While only faint traces of such asceticism are evident in Tatian’s surviving works, the allegation has stayed with him over the centuries.

Tatian is most famous, however, as the author of the *Diatessaron*, a harmony that combines the four Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John into a single text (hence its Greek name, *dia-tessaron*, “through [the] four [Gospels]”). This single-gospel narrative of Jesus’s life was widely used among Syriac Christians until at least the fifth century. It is unclear what the original language of the *Diatessaron* was. If Tatian composed it during his time in Rome, then he likely would have composed it in Greek (or possibly even in Latin); if, after his return to the East, then it is likely that he composed it in Syriac. Regardless, the *Diatessaron* survives in part through quotations in a fragmentary Syriac commentary written by Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century. In addition to this gospel harmony, by the third century more or less the entire Hebrew Bible was also translated into Syriac directly from Hebrew, perhaps by Syriac-speaking Jews in Edessa. The name “Peshiṭta” was given to this translation of the Old Testament in the ninth century, but the sense of this word is unclear: perhaps “Peshiṭta” meant it was a “simple” translation, although “widespread” or “common” are also possible meanings. These two biblical translations, Tatian’s *Diatessaron* and the Peshiṭta, along with an early translation of the four separate gospels (the so-called Old Syriac Version), constitute the biblical matrix out of which Syriac Christianity emerged.

Apart from translations of the Old and New Testaments, like its Western counterparts, early Syriac Christianity was shaped by apocryphal literature, especially apocryphal acts of the apostles. Particularly beloved by Syriac Christians were the *Acts of Thomas*, originally composed in Syriac during the third century and translated into Greek soon afterward. The *Acts of Thomas* narrate the travels and travails of the apostle Judas Thomas, whose very name in Aramaic, “Thomas” (*T’oma*), is derived from the word “twin” (*ta’ma*) leading some Christians to describe Thomas as Jesus’s twin brother. This theme of “twinning” was important for the early Christian tradition. In a number of Christian texts from the second and third centuries, the apostle Thomas, Jesus’s “twin,” becomes



the model for every Christian, who is encouraged to discover that their innermost self is the “living Jesus,” an inner divine light. This moment of self-knowledge transforms one into another twin of Jesus, a kind of divine double.

The *Acts* open with Jesus ordering Thomas to evangelize India, and most of the action takes place in India, where he is eventually martyred. Apart from the theme of twinning, one of the distinctive features of the *Acts* is that Thomas preaches complete sexual renunciation (once again invoking the specter of Tatian’s “encratism”). Thomas runs afoul of local nobles and kings for persuading the wives of these powerful men to no longer sleep with their husbands. In two of the manuscripts of the *Acts*, Thomas sings a long hymn while he is imprisoned. Often called the *Hymn of the Pearl*, it is a story of a young prince from the East who travels to Egypt to recover a pearl from a dragon and is imprisoned there in a kind of stupor until his royal family sends emissaries to bring him home. The hymn has no obvious Christian content, and was probably an earlier, freestanding composition that at some point was incorporated into the *Acts*. This would be in keeping with the tendency of apocryphal acts to grow over time as successive editions and translations expand on or add new vignettes.

The *Acts of Thomas* narrate the apostle’s journey to India from the Red Sea in such a way as to suggest that Thomas evangelized south India, where in fact there is a large community of Christians in Kerala that traces itself back to his first-century mission. It remains unknown, and perhaps unknowable, whether in fact the apostle Thomas himself evangelized India. But what remains certain is that Christian communities have flourished in India since at least the third century, and that at some point they became, in large part, members of the East Syrian Church, and so adopted Syriac as a liturgical language. With the arrival of Europeans (especially the Portuguese) in the sixteenth century, successive divisions have taken place, such that in contemporary Kerala there are now seven different churches associated with the Syriac tradition.

With the rise of imperial orthodoxy in the fourth- and fifth-century Roman Empire, there was a demand for stories about the origins of Syriac Christianity in and around Edessa that would highlight its own antiquity and its orthodoxy. The fifth century witnessed widespread controversies in the Christian East over matters of Christology—that is, debates about the constitution of the incarnate Christ. Especially in the wake of those controversies and the bitter divisions they engendered, some liked to look back on the first through fourth centuries as a time of an undivided church. The historical evidence, however, suggests a rather more diverse picture, as was the case throughout the Mediterranean world. Communities associated with heterodox Christian thinkers such as Marcion and Bardaisan seemed to flourish alongside proto-orthodox communities. A new religious group called “Manichaeans” emerged from Mesopotamia in the third century, claiming to be the true Christians with the true gospel and the caretakers of the true church. From Mesopotamia to China, Syriac Christians vied with Manichaean missionaries not only for converts but also for control over the name and legacy of Christianity. The emerging proto-orthodox community would itself eventually split along a fault line

revealed by the Arian crisis. The fourth-century Egyptian presbyter Arius believed that God the Father was the only uncreated divine person; God the Son was created as a kind of secondary god, a mediator between God the Father and his creation. Some agreed with Arius's view, and others vigorously opposed it, arguing that God the Son was eternal, uncreated, and "consubstantial" (*homoousios*) with God the Father. The later view eventually prevailed at the Councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381, whose creeds established Trinitarian orthodoxy in the East and in the West.

We have access to a substantially larger quantity of Syriac texts from the fourth century on. From this period come the writings of Aphrahat (the first half of the fourth century), the anonymous *Book of Steps* (late fourth or early fifth century), and the extensive corpus of Ephrem (d. 373). Aphrahat lived in the Persian empire under the king Shapur II and was known as "the Persian Sage." He is the author of twenty-three so-called *Demonstrations*: roughly the first half concerns topics in Christian asceticism; and the second half is a polemic against Judaizing tendencies among his contemporary Christians. Aphrahat remains a crucial witness to forms of Syriac asceticism and protomonasticism, prior to the influence of Egyptian forms that would later predominate. He speaks of the *bnay* or *bnat qyama*, the "sons and daughters of the covenant." These were committed lay Christians who practiced a moderate form of asceticism in community with each other, with the expectation of celibacy. Their goal was the imitation of Christ, whose Greek title, "Only Begotten" (*monogenēs*), translates into Syriac as *ihidaya*, the one who is "single" or "solitary." Christ's title is borrowed by these pious ascetics, such that the sons and daughters of the covenant become *ihidaye* (plural), the solitary ones.

Further evidence for this protomonastic tradition is found in the *Book of Steps*, written sometime between the mid-fourth and early fifth centuries. The book categorizes two types of Christians: the so-called perfect, who are expected to be celibate, and the upright, who are not. The author evidently felt that standards were slipping, and the book is offered as an explanation of the two paths and an exhortation to practice with renewed faith and vigor. The *Book of Steps* was long thought to be representative of the Messalian movement. The name Messalian, Syriac for "one who prays" (Greek *Euchitēs*), was a slur given to monks who allegedly believed they could achieve a direct, sensible experience of the divine and thus had no need of the sacraments or the church that administered them. Although the *Book of Steps* is no longer thought to be a Messalian text, the charge of Messalianism haunts the Syriac mystical and ascetical tradition, especially its theology of prayer.

The fourth century also produced the most famous author of the Syriac Christian tradition, Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373). A deacon, poet, and theologian, Ephrem spent most of his life in the city of Nisibis, until that city was transferred from Roman to Persian hands in the year 363, at which time he relocated to Edessa for the last decade of his life. Ephrem's writings fall into four main categories: prose works, such as his commentary on the *Diatessaron* or his refutations of Bardaisan, Marcion, and Mani; so-called "artistic"

prose; *madrashē* or hymns; and *memre* or verse sermons. Ephrem's fame derives primarily from the latter two. He stands at the head of a distinguished line of theologians in the Syriac tradition who chose to write in verse rather than prose, and whose theology is rich in imagery and symbolism while eschewing dialectics and disputation. His talent as a poet-theologian and his Nicene orthodoxy led Greek and Latin authors outside the Syriac world to embrace him. Early Greek biographical sketches of Ephrem sought to associate him with Basil the Great, one of the architects of Nicene orthodoxy and a founder of monasticism in Cappadocia. The fictional association with Basil appears also in the Syriac *Life of Ephrem*. Since Ephrem was a prestigious figure at the edges of the Roman Empire, the Greek church was eager to confer legitimacy on him, and then to claim him as its own.

In contrast to our earliest sources, Aphrahat, the *Book of Steps*, and Ephrem expressed little interest in the Greek influences coming from the West. This has led some to regard them and their age as somehow representing a purer Syriac Christian spirituality, free from the corrupting influences of Greek philosophy and science that would come with the fifth- and sixth-century translation movement. But sources from the second and third centuries suggest that the Syriac tradition was already negotiating the influence of Hellenism. Whatever their motivation for resisting Greek influence, then, it is unlikely that Aphrahat, the *Book of Steps*, and especially Ephrem did so out of some pure, uncorrupted ignorance. It is more accurate to think of them as deliberately turning away from Hellenism, in the hopes of developing a more idiomatic style of theology. So, rather than think of their spirituality as purer, or more pristine, it is better to think of them as investing in a religious and cultural retrenchment of sorts. Seen from the larger perspective of widespread cultural exchange in the region, they seem to have rather zealously guarded their own tradition in an increasingly multicultural world.

## THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES

The fifth and sixth centuries stand out as the formative period in which several Syriac-speaking Christian communities formally separated from imperial Roman orthodoxy, including the East Syrian community that became the modern Church of the East and the West Syrian community that became the modern Syrian Orthodox Church. Christological and ecclesiastical controversies coincided with flourishing ascetic traditions, both in individuals like the famous “stylites” (pillar-dwellers) and in the prominent monasteries of Syria and Mesopotamia. These monasteries played a critical role in the expression of distinctive mystical and exegetical traditions as the communities were restructuring their ecclesiastical identities in relation to empire. At this time, Rabbula, the bishop of Edessa (d. 435), and Philoxenus, the bishop of Mabbug (d. 523), circulated new Syriac translations of the New Testament, and the School of the Persians in Edessa was replaced by the famous School of Nisibis, which trained generations of exegetes, theologians, and church leaders for the East Syrian Church. The fifth and sixth centuries are renowned as

a period with an extraordinary number of doctrinal conflicts. But this was also a period in which intellectual and ascetic creativity flourished.

It would be difficult to overstate the turbulence of Syriac-speaking Christians' relations with the empires with which they interacted. While in 325 the Council of Nicaea primarily addressed issues of the Trinity, it did not resolve questions of Christology—that is, the question of how best to express the belief that Christ was both fully human and fully divine. This was the issue that dominated fifth- and sixth-century controversies. In the early fifth century, church leaders adamantly disagreed about the nature and person of the incarnate Christ; this disagreement created a series of long-lasting rifts in the church. A conflict initially developed in the eastern Roman Empire between Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria (d. 444), and Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople (d. 451). They agreed that Christ had both a human and a divine nature; they disagreed on how the two natures coexisted and what significance this had for Christ's role as savior. Cyril followed popular piety in acclaiming Mary *Theotokos* or "God bearer," because the child Mary bore was fully divine. Nestorius objected that this title confused Christ's two distinct natures, human and divine. In his view, Mary was the mother of the man Jesus, and so of his human nature. But she was not the mother of the Word, the Son eternally begotten from and "of one being" (*homoousios*) with God the Father. Nestorius preferred the title *Christotokos* or "Christ bearer" for Mary. These Christological debates became highly politicized as other powerful church leaders, as well as members of the imperial family, offered their support to one side or the other. In the end, Cyril gained the upper hand after a convoluted series of competing council meetings; in 431, the Council of Ephesus anathematized the teachings of Nestorius and set the standard for imperial orthodoxy.

East of the Roman Empire, however, Christians in the Sasanian Empire organized themselves around the bishop of the Persian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410. Reacting in part to regional pressures from their Zoroastrian rulers, whose ancient and dualist cosmology divided the world into opposing forces of good and evil and whose rituals centered on fire as a purifying element, these Eastern bishops reconvened in 424 and declared their independence from the Roman church. These two acts separated the East Syrian Church from the churches that still looked to Roman leaders to define Christian orthodoxy. Notably, these events preceded the Council of Ephesus in 431, and the East Syrian Church continued to accept as integral to its doctrine the teachings of Nestorius's mentor Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), who argued that the two natures (and persons) of the incarnate Christ remained distinct. This was also a period of sporadic persecution for some Christians in the Sasanian Empire and the southern Arabian peninsula.

Back in the Roman Empire, however, the debates about the teachings of Cyril and the Council of Ephesus's condemnation of Nestorius were far from settled. In 449, Dioscorus (d. 454), who in 444 had succeeded Cyril as the bishop of Alexandria, persuaded Emperor Theodosius II to call the Second Council of Ephesus. This council was held in