# THE 'NESTORIAN' CHURCH: A LAMENTABLE MISNOMER

S.P. BROCK
THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

According to a very widespread understanding of church history the christological controversies of the fifth century were brought to a happy conclusion with the Definition of Faith issued at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. This definition was accepted as normative by both Greek East and Latin West (and hence, subsequently, by the various Reformed churches of the West). Only a few obstinate Orientals (so this conventional picture would have it) refused to accept the Council's Definition of Faith, whether it be out of ignorance, stupidity, stubbornness, or even separatist nationalist aspirations: these people were, on the one side of the theological spectrum, the Nestorians, and at the other end, the Monophysites – heretics both, the former rejecting the Council of Ephesus (431) and believing in two persons in the incarnate Christ, the latter rejecting the Council of Chalcedon and holding that Christ's human nature was swallowed up by the divine nature.

It need hardly be said that such a picture is an utterly pernicious caricature, whose roots lie in a hostile historiographical tradition which has dominated virtually all textbooks of church history from antiquity down to the present day, with the result that the term 'Nestorian Church' has become the standard designation for the ancient oriental church which in the past called itself 'The Church of the East', but which today prefers a fuller title 'The Assyrian Church of the East'. Such a designation is not only discourteous to the modern members of this venerable church, but also – as this paper aims to show – both inappropriate and misleading.

The reality behind the divisions caused by the christological controversies concerning the relationship of the humanity and the divinity in the incarnate Christ was, needless to say, far more complex than the popular caricature suggests. While it is quite true that the Assyrian Church of the East has never accepted the Council of Ephesus, and the Oriental Orthodox churches have, in their turn, rejected the doctrinal definition of the Council of Chalcedon, each had perfectly sound reasons for doing so. In the case of the Council of Ephesus, it was not to any doctrinal decision (the Council issued no definition of faith) but to its irregular

procedure to which the Church of the East has always – and not without some good reason – objected.[1] The Council of Chalcedon, too, is seen from a quite different perspective: whereas from the standpoint of what one may call the Latin and Greek church this Council brought about a reconciliation between the Antiochene and Alexandrian traditions of christology and the conclusion of the christological controversy, from an Eastern Mediterranean perspective, Chalcedon was certainly not experienced at putting an end to controversy: rather, it was the cause of much further controversy which continued on till the seventh century, when the Arab conquests effectively fossilized the different ecclesiastical positions that had emerged, and it is these positions which are still reflected today in the various Christian churches of the Middle East. In particular, the Chalcedonian Definition of Faith, speaking of Christ being incarnate in two natures and constituting one *hypostasis* and one *prosopon*, far from being accepted as a happy medium between two extremes, was seen by many as an unsatisfactory compromise, and one which was illogical to boot, since (many people argued), if one is to speak of two natures, this implies two *hypostaseis*, and if one speaks of one *hypostasis*, this implies one nature. This accusation of illogicality was made against the Chalcedonian Definition of Faith, not only by theologians of the Oriental Orthodox tradition of Alexandrine christology such as Severus of Antioch, but also by theologians of the Church of the East, such as the catholicos Išoʿyahb II (628–46), who remarks as follows:[2]

Although those who gathered at the Synod of Chalcedon were clothed with the intention of restoring the faith, yet they too slid away from the true faith: owing to their feeble phraseology, wrapped in an obscure meaning, they provided a stumbling block to many. Although, in accordance with the opinion of their own minds, they preserved the true faith with the confession of the two natures, yet by their formula of one *qnoma* (= *hypostasis*), it seems, they tempted weak minds. As an outcome of the affair a contradiction occurred, for with the formula 'one *qnoma*' they corrupted the confession of 'two natures'; while with the 'two natures' they rebuked and refuted the 'one *qnoma*'. So they found themselves standing at a cross roads, and they wavered and turned aside from the blessed ranks of the orthodox, yet they did not join the assemblies of the heretics; they both pulled down and built up, while lacking a foundation for their feet. On what side we should number them I do not know, for their terminology cannot stand up, as Nature and Scripture testify: for in these, many *qnome* can be found in a single 'nature', but that there should be various 'natures' in a single *qnoma* has never been the case and has not been heard of.

[1] For an interesting study of this council by a metropolitan of the Church of the East, see Mar Aprem, *The Council of Ephesus of 431* (Trichur: Mar Narsai Press, 1978). Particularly relevant in the context of the Church of the East's attitude to this council is A. de Halleux, 'La première session du Concile d'Ephèse (22 juin 431)', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 59 (1993), 48–87.

[2] L.R.M. Sako, *Lettre christologique du patriarche syro-oriental Išoʿyahb II de Gdala* (Rome, 1983), 42 (Syr.), 146–7 (trans.).

By the time that Išoʿyahb II was writing the Church of the East had for the most part adopted the formula of two natures and two *qnome*, but one *prosopon*, in the incarnate Christ, though (as we shall see below) *qnoma* there has rather a different sense from its translation equivalent in Greek, *hypostasis*. But our immediate concern here is the point that Išoʿyahb is making concerning the illogicality of the Chalcedonian Definition: if you speak of two natures, this necessarily implies two *qnome*. At the other end of the christological spectrum Severus makes the same sort of point, but taking as his starting point the one *hypostasis*: if you speak of one *hypostasis*, this implies one nature.[3] As will become apparent below, there were different understandings, not only of the term *qnoma*, but also of the term 'nature' (Greek *physis*, Syriac *kyana*).

Another point that one needs to remember when dealing with the history of the church in the fifth and sixth centuries is that at this period the term 'ecumenical council' meant, not a 'universal' council, but one which took place within the *oikoumene* of the Roman Empire. Thus an 'ecumenical council' was of no direct concern to the Christian Church – the Church of the East – in the Persian Empire (approximately modern Iraq and Iran), unless that church subsequently decided to recognize it (as indeed happened in the case of the Council of Nicaea eighty-five years after the Council had sat).

In order to gain a better understanding of the doctrinal position of all the non-Chalcedonian churches, then, it is essential to get rid of over-simplistic conceptual models of church history. The threefold picture of heretical Nestorian, orthodox Chalcedon, and heretical Monophysite is one such unfortunate model. Instead, it might be suggested that we replace it with a sevenfold model (see Table), where we have the range of opinion in the two hundred-odd years following the Council of Chalcedon better represented, running from one end of the christological spectrum to the other.

In the following table the christological spectrum is depicted horizontally, running from the Antiochene pole, with its emphasis on duality, resulting from a keen desire to maintain the transcendance of the divinity and a soteriology based on the assumed humanity in Christ, to the opposite, Alexandrine, pole with its emphasis on unity, and the desire to stress the full reality of the incarnation. Seven individual positions are specifically identified, with the two middle ones (nos 3 and 4) representing the standpoint of the Chalcedonian Definition of Faith. At the Antiochene end of the spectrum it is important to distinguish positions 1 and 2, above

[3] J. Lebon, *Severi Antiocheni orationes ad Nephalium* (CSCO 119 (Syr. 64), 1949), 16: 'It is obvious to all who have just a modicum of training in the teachings of true religion that it is contradictory to speak of two natures with reference to the one Christ, he being one *hypostasis*. For whenever one speaks of one *hypostasis*, one must necessarily also speak of one nature'.

all in view of the uncertainty surrounding Nestorius's real position. At the other end of the spectrum it is absolutely essential to distinguish position 6 (that of the Oriental Orthodox churches today) from position 7 (that of Eutyches, a position consistently condemned from the very beginning by the Oriental Orthodox); since the traditional designation 'Monophysite', covering both, obscures this distinction (and all too frequently leads to misrepresentation of the Oriental Orthodox position[4]), it is important to employ a different term: for this purpose the term 'henophysite' (by analogy with 'henotheism') has been employed (purists might prefer 'miaphysite').

Read downwards from the top, the Table proceeds chronologically, with the names of the main proponents of the different positions. In the lower half of the table an indication is given of which key formulae are acceptable to which positions; from this it will become at once obvious that, if the formula 'Christ is consubstantial with us as well as with the Father' is taken as the criterion of orthodox christology, then only the position of Eutyches is unacceptable.

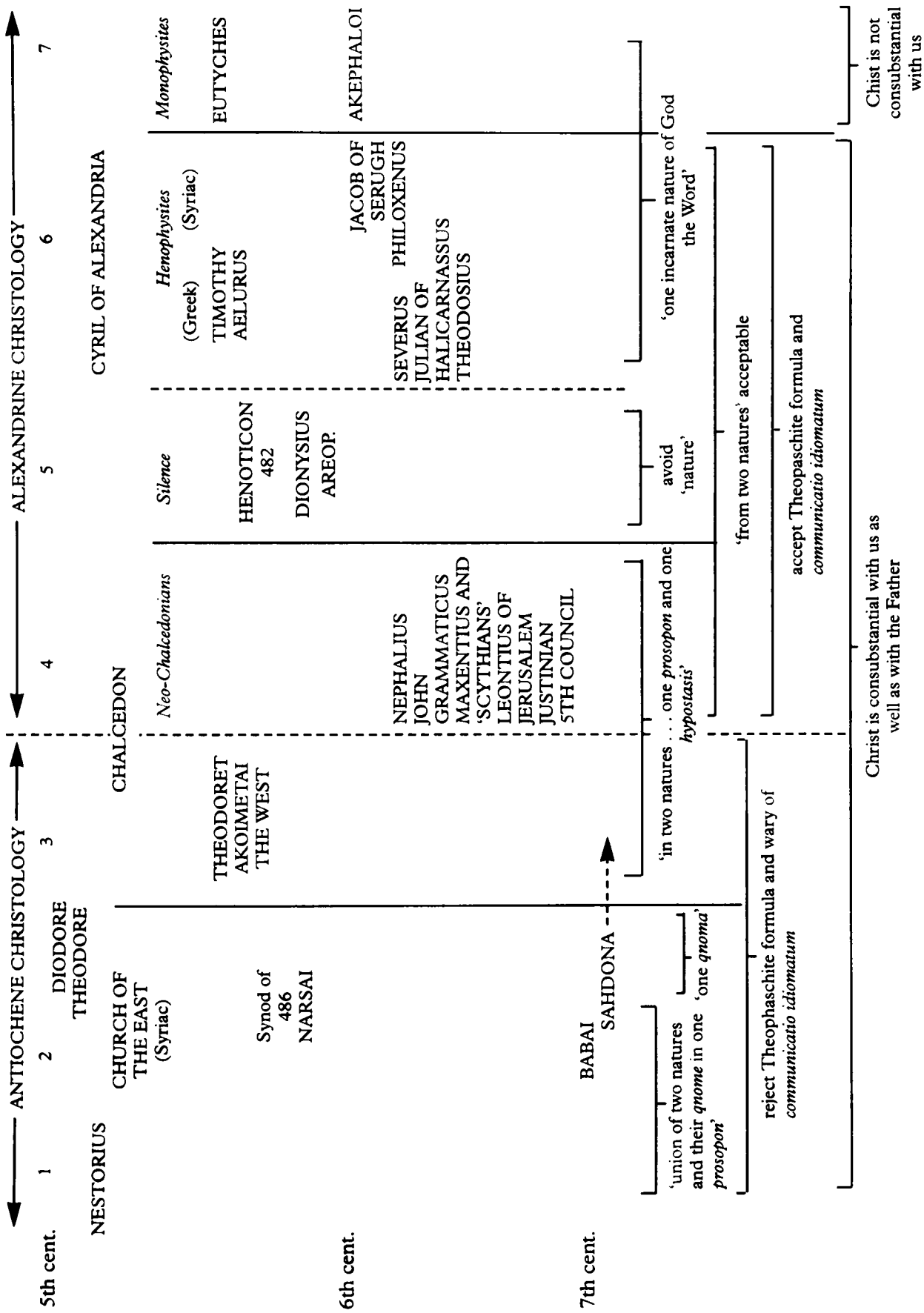
*Terminology*

As has already been indicated, one of the reasons for difference of opinion on christology lay in the different understandings given to certain of the key terms. Here three specific points are worth making in connection with the technical terminology employed in the course of these christological controversies:

1. The Chalcedonian Definition is expressed in terms typical of the Greek theological agenda of the time, whose key terms, featuring at the centre of the disputes, were 'nature', '*hypostasis*' and 'person' (or '*prosopon*'). In this connection, we should at once observe that these terms are in fact not particularly common in the various statements of faith put out by the Church of the East in the series of synods held from the late fifth to the early seventh century:[5] native Syriac writers, unless they were writing polemical

[4] See, for example, the complaint by V.C. Samuel, a distinguished theologian of the Indian Orthodox Church, concerning the article on Monophysites in the 1958 edition of the *Oxford dictionary of the Christian church*: 'what is noted in this article is obviously not the teaching of the church tradition that rejected the Council of Chalcedon. It is the imagination of the writer, which the editorial board of the reputed repository of the best English scholarship in church history rather callously approved'. The quotation comes from his 'The christological controversy and the division of the church', in *Orthodox identity in India: essays in honour of V.C. Samuel*, ed. M.K. Kuriakose (Bangalore: Union Theological College, 1988), 130. (The article in question will appear in a very different (and one hopes, more acceptable) form in the forthcoming third edition of this *Dictionary*, ed. E.A. Livingstone.)

[5] Edited with French translation by J.B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902); there is an English translation of the relevant doctrinal statements in my 'The christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the fifth to early seventh centuries: preliminary considerations and materials', *Aksum-Thyateira: a Festschrift for Archbishop Methodios*, ed. G. Dragas (London/Athens: Thyateira House, 1985), 125–42, reprinted in my *Studies in Syriac Christianity* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992), ch. XII.


ANTIOCHENE CHRISTOLOGY
ALEXANDRINE CHRISTOLOGY
5th cent.
6th cent.
7th cent.
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
NESTORIUS
CHURCH OF THE EAST (Syriac)
DIODORE
THEODORE
Synod of 486
NARSAI
BABAI
SAHDONA
CHALCEDON
THEODORET
AKOIMETAI
THE WEST
Neo-Chalcedonians
NEPHALIUS
JOHN
GRAMMATICUS
MAXENTIUS AND 'SCYTHIANS'
LEONTIUS OF JERUSALEM
JUSTINIAN
5TH COUNCIL
Silence
HENOTICON 482
DIONYSIUS AREOP.
CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA
Henophysites
(Greek)
(Syriac)
TIMOTHY AELURUS
SEVERUS
JULIAN OF HALICARNASSUS
THEODOSIUS
JACOB OF SERUGH
PHILOXENUS
Monophysites
EUTYCHES
AKEPHALOI
'union of two natures and their qnome in one prosopon'
'one qnoma'
'in two natures . . . one prosopon and one hypostasis'
avoid 'nature'
'one incarnate nature of God the Word'
reject Theophaschite formula and wary of communicatio idiomatum
'from two natures' acceptable
accept Theopaschite formula and communicatio idiomatum
Christ is consubstantial with us as well as with the Father
Chist is not consubstantial with us

treatises, preferred to express the relationship between the divinity and the humanity in the incarnate Christ using different terms. This fact alone suggests that it is inappropriate to restrict any definition of orthodoxy to the terminology used in the Chalcedonian Definition.

2. Even where the three Greek terms (or their Syriac equivalents) are used, different people understood them in different ways. Thus, for example, to the Church of the East, the term *kyana*, or 'nature' (corresponding to Greek *physis*), was understood as being close in meaning to *ousia*, or 'essence'.[6] To the Henophysites, however, *physis* was regarded as being closer in meaning to *hypostasis*. This difference of understanding of course had important implications for the way in which the terms were used in christological statements.

3. Related to this second point is a third. The Greek term *hypostasis* is represented in Syriac by the word *qnoma*, which has a much wider range of meanings than the Greek has. When the Church of the East uses *qnoma* in connection with 'nature' it usually speaks of 'the two natures and their *qnomas*', where *qnoma* means something like 'individual manifestation': a *qnoma* is an individual instance or example of a *kyana* (which is understood as always abstract), but this individual manifestation is not necessarily a self-existent instance of a *kyana*. Thus, when the Church of the East speaks of two *qnome* in the incarnate Christ, this does not have the same sense as two *hypostaseis*, where *hypostasis* does have the sense of self-existence. Unfortunately some European translators have confused the issue even more by perniciously rendering *qnoma* as 'person', as if the underlying term was *parsopa* (i.e. Greek *prosopon*), thus implying that the Church of the East believed that there were two persons in Christ, in other words the classic definition of 'Nestorianism'. (Whether or not Nestorius actually taught this, however, is disputed, and even if he did, then what he really meant by this terminology is far from clear).[7]

*How Relevant is Nestorius?*

The Church of the East undoubtedly lies at the Antiochene end of the christological spectrum, but that does not make it Nestorian – just as Pope Leo's allocation of Christ's different actions to, now his divine, now his human nature, does not make him into a Nestorian either, even though that is what his theological opponents called him. Just as in politics today a right-wing politician might try to smear his socialist opponent by

[6] See, for example, my 'The christology of the Church of the East', 130–1.

[7] See, above all, A. de Halleux, 'Nestorius, histoire et doctrine', *Irénikon*, 56 (1993), 38–51, 163–77, and the literature cited there.

calling him a communist, so in the religious polemics of the fifth and sixth centuries one side would try to put the other side into disrepute by calling it by the name of someone, or some party, that had already been publically condemned as heretical. Since Nestorius had been condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431, 'Nestorian' was a convenient dirty word with which to tar any of one's theological opponents who followed the Antiochene christological tradition.

If one looks at the writers of the Church of the East in the period of the christological controversies, however, one will find that the Greek theologian they regularly hold in high respect is not Nestorius, but an older contemporary of Nestorius, namely Theodore of Mopsuestia, who died in 428, before the Council of Ephesus. It is Theodore's christological language, as well as his approach to biblical exegesis, which had a profound influence on the theology of the Church of the East. Indeed, if one wanted to characterize the Church of the East in this way, it would be much more appropriate to call it 'Theodoran', rather than 'Nestorian'.[8]

What, then, is the attitude of the Church of the East to Nestorius? In the first place it is very significant that, in the course of the eight synods held by the Church of the East between 486 and 612 the name of Nestorius never once occurs, whereas Theodore is on several occasions held up as an authority on doctrinal matters and as a model for orthodox belief. This is not, of course, to deny that Nestorius is not held in respect by the Church of the East, as one of the three 'Greek Doctors', who are commemorated in the liturgical Calendar (the other two being Diodore and Theodore). The earliest reference to this trio comes in a verse homily, specifically on the Three Doctors, by the poet-theologian Narsai,[9] who died *c.* 500. This homily is in fact highly instructive, for, while it is clear that Narsai had a good knowledge of Diodore's and (especially) Theodore's teaching (available to him in Syriac translations), what he has to say about Nestorius is very vague and generalized: clearly Narsai had no real knowledge of Nestorius's teaching, and Nestorius simply features in the homily as a martyr for the Antiochene christological tradition who had been hounded into exile by the 'Egyptian Pharoah', in other words, Cyril of Alexandria, the protagonist of the opposite theological camp.

It will have been this same understanding of Nestorius's role

[8] Similarly W. Macomber, 'The christology of the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon A.D. 486', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica,* 24 (1958), 142–54; especially 143 n. 4 ('The Church of Persia and its christology might more accurately be called Mopsuestian').

[9] Edited with French translation by F. Martin, 'Homélie de Narses sur les trois docteurs nestoriens', *Journal Asiatique,* ix. 14 (1899), 446–92 (text), and ix. 15 (1900), 469–525. See also K. McVey, 'The *memra* of Narsai on the three Nestorian doctors as an example of forensic rhetoric', *III Symposium Syriacum*, ed. R. Lavenant (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 221; Rome, 1983), 87–96.

that led to his name being attached to one of the three eucharistic anaphoras in use in the Church of the East (the other two being attributed to the apostles Addai and Mari, and to Theodore of Mopsuestia).

There is indeed one work of Nestorius which survives in Syriac translation, commonly known as the 'Bazaar of Heracleides'.[10] Significantly, however, this is in the form of an apologia, written while Nestorius was in exile, claiming that his views were really much the same as the views of those who opposed Eutyches. Furthermore, the work was only translated into Syriac in 539–40, half a century after the two late fifth-century synods[11] at which the Church of the East is commonly said to have adopted 'Nestorianism'![12]

It is in fact essential to recognize that the name 'Nestorius' conjures up totally different connotations to different parties: to mainstream Christian tradition Nestorius is essentially a theologian who pressed the duality in Christ to unacceptable lengths, while to the Church of the East he is primarily seen as a martyr of the Antiochene christological cause, whose exact theological position was not a matter of concern seeing that his works, with one exception, were not translated into Syriac. What needs to be realized is that these two radically different perceptions of Nestorius have given rise to different perceptions of where the Church of the East differs doctrinally from the rest of the Christian churches: thus, while the latter see the question of Nestorius's christology, and its interpretation, as a central issue, to the Church of the East this is largely irrelevant, and a red herring as far as ecumenical dialogue is concerned.[13]

*Mary, Bearer of Christ, not Theotokos*

When, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Chaldean priest Paul Bedjan edited the printed edition of the *Ḥudra*, or Breviary, for use in the Chaldean Church, he introduced the term *yaldat allaha*, 'bearer of God' (Theotokos), on many occasions, against the usage of the Church of the East which does not employ this term. Although the title 'Theotokos' for Mary can be traced back to the third century, it never gained wide currency till well on in the fifth century; indeed it

10 According to L. Abramowski the *Liber Heracleidis* consists of two separate works, a second apologia by Nestorius himself, written near the end of his life, and a work by a later author whom she designates as Pseudo-Nestorius: see her *Untersuchungen zum Liber Heraclidis des Nestorius* (CSCO 242 (Subsidia 22), 1963). It should be noted that the English translation by G.R. Driver and L. Hodgson, *The Bazaar of Heracleides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925) is not always very satisfactory (see the review by R.H. Connolly in *Journal of Theological Studies*, O.S. 27 (1926), 191–200; the French translation by F. Nau, *Le livre d'Héraclide de Damas* (Paris: Letouzey, 1910) is more reliable.

11 In 484 and 486; only the acts of the latter are preserved.

12 Thus specifically W. de Vries, 'Die syrisch-nestorianische Haltung zu Chalkedon', *Das Konzil von Chalkedon*, I (Wurzburg: Echter Verlag, 1951), 603: 'Das offizielle Annahme des Nestorianismus durch die persische Kirche geschah auf der Synode von Seleukia des Jahres 486'.

13 This became clear at a Consultation on the christology of the Church of the East held in June 1994, organized by the Stiftung Pro Oriente, Vienna.

was Nestorius's famous sermon in Constantinople in 429, rejecting it in favour of 'Christotokos', that made the term a bone of contention, and one to be adopted by his enemies. It is often assumed that the absence of the term *yaldat allaha* (i.e. Theotokos) from the liturgical tradition of the Church of the East was directly due to the influence of Nestorius. This, however, grossly oversimplifies the matter, and overlooks the fact that the Church of the East, across the borders from the Roman Empire, will already have developed the basic elements of its own liturgical usage as far as epithets for Mary are concerned;[14] furthermore, since the term Theotokos did not become widespread in the Roman Empire until after the christological controversies had got under way, it is hardly surprising that the Church of the East never adopted a term that had quickly become a hall-mark of their theological opponents. It is also important to observe that to call Mary *yaldat allaha* would be completely out of harmony with the Antiochene understanding of how salvation for humanity was effected in the person of Christ. Since this understanding focuses on the humanity of Christ, the *homo assumptus*, which is raised to glory as a pledge of the salvation of all humanity, it would have obscured the whole thrust of this view of soteriology had the term *yaldat allaha* ever been adopted.

This understanding of soteriology is, of course, entirely different from that of the Alexandrine position, for there the emphasis is laid on the full reality of the incarnation, of the 'descent' of the divinity into the human condition, seeing that 'what is not assumed is not saved'. These two different conceptual models for the way in which salvation is effected are intimately linked with the two different christological positions, the one with its emphasis on maintaining the distinction between the divinity and the humanity, and the other with its concern to stress their union in one *physis* (understood in the sense of *hypostasis*). The Church of the East's understanding is nicely brought out in a very striking image that occurs a number of times in its liturgical texts. Thus God the Word is spoken of as 'having lowered himself to humility in order to raise up our fallen state to the exalted rank of his divinity, and in the person of the "hostage" he took from us (i.e. his humanity), he associated us in the glory of his majesty'.[15] (One should remember, of course, that 'hostage' is used in the older sense of the word, that is, someone who is given as a surety – rather than, who has been seized by violence, as the term has generally come to imply today.)

[14] Ephrem's rich collection of honorific titles for Mary will also have been familiar. One need only consult the liturgical books of the Church of the East for the 'Commemoration of the Blessed Mary', on the first or second Friday after Christmas, to see that the Church of the East is certainly not the proto-Protestant body that some Protestant missionaries of the past have tried to make it out to be.

[15] See my 'Christ "The Hostage": a theme in the East Syriac liturgical tradition and its origins', *Logos. Festschrift für Luise Abramowski*, eds H.C. Brennecke, E.L. Grasmuck, C. Markschies (Beihefte zur *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentiche Wissenschaft* 67, 1993), 472–85 (the quotation will be found on p. 485).

*A Glance at the Early History of the Church of the East*

At this point, it will be helpful to glance at the early development of the Church of the East from a diachronic perspective, since the beginnings of this church of course go back long before either Theodore or Nestorius was born.

If one reads Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical history* – our prime source for all pre-Constantinian church history – one will find nothing about the Church of the East. This was, however, not because the Church of the East did not yet exist, only to come into being as a result of the fifth-century christological controversies. Rather, it was because Eusebius was only interested in the history of the church within the bounds of the Roman Empire; accordingly the Church of the East, situated beyond the Empire's eastern borders, in the Persian Empire, fell quite outside his interests. It is unfortunate that a great many subsequent church historians, right up to the present day, have followed Eusebius's example in this and so likewise pay no attention to the history of the early church outside the Roman Empire.[16]

Although the origins of the church in what is now Iraq and Iran are shrouded in obscurity, it is probable that Christianity was already quite well established in certain localities by the end of the second century.[17] In the late third century Christians are listed among the religious groups whom the Zoroastrian zealot Kartir claimed (in an inscription) to have suppressed.[18] It is, however, only in the fourth century that we begin to have any extensive writings in Syriac from the Church of the East, notably the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat,[19] from the middle of the century, and the *Liber graduum*,[20] perhaps from the end. The mid-fourth century also saw periods of intense persecution of Christians within the Sasanian Empire, and the martyr

16 For this point see my 'Christians in the Sasanian Empire: a case of divided loyalties', *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), 1–19, reprinted in my *Syriac perspectives on late antiquity* (London: Variorum, 1984), ch. VI, esp. 1–2. Particularly welcome, in the light of this, is the recent appearance of S.H. Moffett, *A history of Christianity in Asia*. I, *Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992).

17 For the earliest period, see M.-L.Chaumont, *La christianisation de l'empire iranien des origines aux grandes persécutions du IVe siècle* (CSCO 499 (Subsidia 80), 1988). For the subsequent history up to the seventh century J. Labourt, *Le christianisme dans l'empire perse* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1904) remains fundamental, though now it needs to be supplemented by J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'Église en Iraq* (CSCO 310 (Subsidia 36), 1970). Reasonably good accounts in English are to be found in W.A. Wigram, *An introduction to the history of the Assyrian church* (London: SPCK, 1910) and W.G. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph* (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Centre, 1974). For the late fifth century, see S. Gero, *Barsauma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the fifth century* (CSCO 426 (Subsidia 63), 1981).

18 There are two terms which evidently refer to two different Christian groups; for their interpretation, see my 'Christians in the Sasanian Empire', 6.

19 For Aphrahat's christology there is now a good monograph by P. Bruns, *Das Christusbild Aphrahats des Persischen Weises* (Bonn: Borengässer, 1990); from a different perspective, see also W. Petersen, 'The christology of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage: an excursus on the 17th Demonstration', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 46 (1992), 241–56.

20 See especially L. Wickham, 'Teachings about God and Christ in the Liber graduum', *Logos. Festschrift für Luise Abramowski* (n. 15 above), 486–98.

literature[21] that subsequently grew up to honour the victims of Šapur II's actions indicates that by this time there was a fairly extensive Christian presence both in towns and in villages. Theological writing from this period reveals a number of distinctive features, and as yet there seems to be little literary contact between Christians across the borders of the two empires. Indicative of this isolation of the Christian church in Persia is the fact, already alluded to, that it was not until a synod held in 410 that the canons of the Council of Nicaea were formally accepted by the Church of the East.[22]

In the fifth century, however, the situation began to change, resulting in much more interaction between Christians on either side of the border. Particularly important from the point of view of doctrinal development was the influence of the great theological school of Edessa. Although Edessa was within the Roman Empire, its school evidently attracted so many students from the Persian Empire that it came to be called 'the Persian School'. This Persian School in Edessa took a strictly Antiochene line on christology, and it was there, in the 430s, that many of Theodore of Mopsuestia's works were translated into Syriac. Later in the century, in the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon, the emperor Zeno finally (in 489) decided to close the School of the Persians, as a dangerous hotbed for strictly dyophysite christology. The result of this closure was that the teachers of the School moved across the border to Nisibis, just inside the Persian Empire. It was through the prestige and influence of this theological school in Nisibis[23] that Theodore's works and teaching became known in the Church of the East, evidently already beginning to become normative from the end of the fifth century onwards. Certainly, for the most important theologian of the Church of the East, Babai the Great (who died in 628),[24] it was Theodore who served as the norm for orthodoxy, in much the same way that – at the other end of the christological spectrum – Cyril of Alexandria's teaching served as the norm for Severus of Antioch.

Given that, in the course of the sixth century, the Byzantine church moved away from the Antiochene pole of the Chalcedonian compromise, and that it actually condemned Theodore and his writings at the Fifth Council in 553, it was not surprising that the

[21] Best known are the two accounts of the martyrdom of the Catholicos Simeon bar Sabba'e, edited with Latin translation by M. Kmosko in *Patrologia Syriaca*, ii (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907). The most convenient guide to the scattered materials is P. Devos, 'Les martyrs persans à travers leur actes syriaques', *Atti del Convegno sul Tema La Persia e il Mondo Greco-Romano* (Rome: Accademia dei Lincei, 1966), 213–35. An English translation of the acts of some women martyrs can be found in S. Brock and S. Harvey, *Holy women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

[22] *Synodicon*, 253–75 (the Council of Nicaea is specifically mentioned on p. 259).

[23] For the School of Nisibis, see A. Vööbus, *A history of the School of Nisibis* (CSCO 266 (Subsidia 26), 1965).

[24] Of particular interest is a monograph on Babai by a scholar of the Syro-Malankara Church in India, G. Chediath, *The christology of Mar Babai the Great* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1982).

few attempts at theological rapprochement with the Church of the East during this period were unsuccessful.[25] Then, in the first half of the seventh century, the Arab invasions cut off the Church of the East even more effectively from the Byzantine world than had ever been the case under the late Persian Sasanians.

In the course of its history the Church of the East has regularly been misunderstood by other Christian churches, sometimes wilfully, sometimes through ignorance. Today, at a time in history when large numbers of Middle Eastern Christians have emigrated to Europe, the Americas and Australia, the Assyrian Church of the East, despite its small size, nevertheless has communities of its people scattered all over the globe;[26] there is, consequently, all the greater need for ancient prejudices and misconceptions to be cleared away. In this connection it is essential that we try to look at the christological teaching of the Assyrian Church of the East from its own starting points and perspectives, rather than from those of the Chalcedonian churches, and to understand the key theological terms in the way that this church understands them, rather than imposing on these same terms the meaning that writers in other christological traditions have given them.

In recent ecumenical dialogue the Assyrian Church of the East has been rather marginalized, and dialogue conducted by the Orthodox and Catholic churches with the non-Chalcedonian churches has primarily been concerned with the Oriental Orthodox churches.[27] Recently, however, there have been some welcome initiatives to incorporate the Assyrian Church of the East into the dialogue.[28]

[25] Justinian held conversations with representatives of the Church of the East perhaps in 562; an account is preserved in a Syriac manuscript of Chalcedonian provenance, edited, with French translation, by A. Guillaumont, 'Justinien et l'église de Perse', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 23/24 (1969–70), 39–66. A theological concordat was actually very nearly reached in 630, aided – but then finally foiled – by political events; see C. Mango, 'Deux études sur Byzance et la Perse Sassanide', *Travaux et Mémoires*, 9 (1985), 105–17.

[26] See G. Yonan, *Assyrer heute* (Hamburg/Wien: Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, 1978), 150–215.

[27] See, for example, J. Madey, *Ecumenism, ecumenical movement and Eastern churches* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1987), 32–50, 127–129; in an appendix Madey gives the documentation for the various accords reached between the Roman Catholic and Oriental Orthodox churches. For more recent developments between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches, see the communiqué of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox churches, reprinted in *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review*, 12 (1990), 78–80, and the following article by W. Taylor, 'Convergence in christology: Amba Bishoi 1990', ibid., 80–4.

[28] In meetings sponsored the Middle East Council of Churches and in consultations organised by the Stiftung Pro Oriente (Vienna); the papers from the Consultation held in Vienna in June 1994, which include two excellent contributions by Bishop Mar Bawai Soro are now published (see n. 30). A significant development took place when, during the recent visit of the Assyrian Catholicos to Rome, Pope John Paul II and Mar Dinkha signed a declaration of common faith (11 November, 1994). Here attention might also be drawn to an excellent account, written from a Greek Orthodox point of view, of the early development of the christology of the Church of the East which can be found in [D.Miller], *The ascetical homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian, translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), 481–541.

In the course of an address made by the present catholicos of the Assyrian Church of the East at his consecration in London in 1976, Mar Dinkha went out of his way to make the point that the label 'Nestorian' for his church was quite unjustified and thus highly misleading: Nestorius, he said, has nothing to do with us; he was a Greek. A little over 650 years earlier the great medieval canonist of the Church of the East, ʿAbdišoʿ metropolitan of Ṣoba (Nisibis), had made very much the same point:[29]

> As for the Orientals [i.e. the Church of the East], since they never changed their faith, but kept it as they had received it from the Apostles, they were called 'Nestorians' quite unjustly, for Nestorius was not their patriarch, nor did they know his language.

ʿAbdišoʿ and Mar Dinkha were entirely right; the association between the Church of the East and Nestorius is of a very tenuous nature, and to continue to call that church 'Nestorian' is, from a historical point of view, totally misleading and incorrect – quite apart from being highly offensive and a breach of ecumenical good manners.[30]

[29] In his theological work entitled *The Pearl* (*Marganitha*), III.4; the text is given in J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, III.1 (Rome: Congregatio de Propaganda Fidei, 1725; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1975), 354–5. An English translation of the work is provided by G.P. Badger, *The Nestorians and their rituals*, II (London: Joseph Masters, 1852), 380–422. The modern reader should be warned that both Assemani in his Latin translation, and Badger in his English, render *qnoma* as 'person', thus giving the false impression that the Church of the East taught that there were two persons in the incarnate Christ. It is interesting that ʿAbdišoʿ simply sees Nestorius as following the orthodox faith of the Church of the East which it had preserved from the time of the Apostles: thus, from his perspective, it is not a case of the Church of the East following Nestorius's teaching, but of Nestorius following that of the Church of the East.

[30] For the ground covered by this paper, see also my rather more detailed discussions in 'The church in the Sasanian Empire and its absence from the Councils in the Roman Empire', in *Syriac dialogue: first non-official consultation on dialogue within the Syriac tradition* (Vienna: Pro Oriente, 1994), 69–85, and 'The christology of the Church of the East: some considerations', in *The traditions and heritage of the Christian East*, eds A.V. Muraviev and D. Afinogenov (Moscow: Indrik, 1996), 159–79.