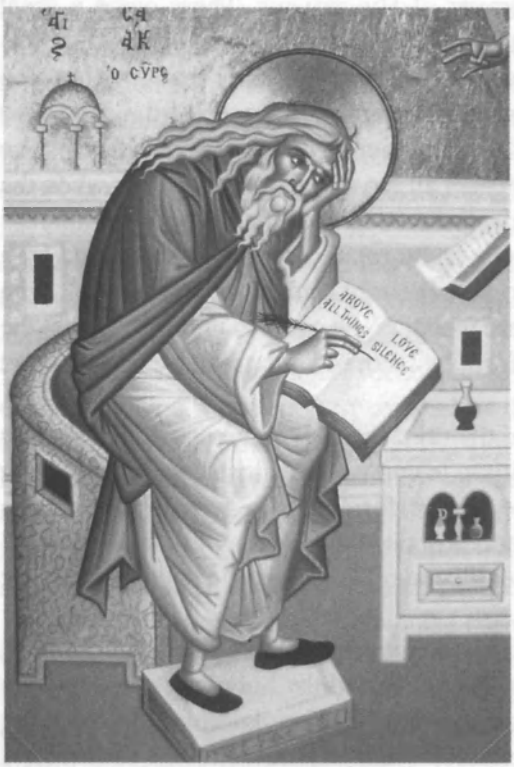
On the 28th of January, the holy Church commemorates our holy Father ISAAC the Syrian.



Saint Isaac the Syrian

Isaac, our holy father among the saints, was born in Beit Qatraye.[12] He flourished in the seventh century. The precise dates of his birth and death are unknown. No information about his parents is extant. We are led to believe, by two autobiographical comments found in the saint's homily on saintly men known to him in his youth, that early on he led a monastic life far from his home. He recounts that once he had fallen ill and went to the cell of a certain brother. Isaac lay himself down in a corner of that cell, so as to receive some care. Isaac remarks, "I had no acquaintance in that region." At another time, Isaac visited and conversed with an elder. The old man counseled Isaac and added, "No one knows thee in this region, nor does anyone know thy life."[13]

Again, while still young, both he and his brother entered the lavra of Saint Matthew, where they received the monastic tonsure. Upon attaining a sufficient degree of ascetic discipline and virtue, Isaac desired greater silence. He departed the community life at the lavra and dwelt in an isolated cell. He led a solitary life, communing with no one but God. At length, his brother became abbot at the lavra. He implored Abba Isaac to return to the monastery, but the latter would not leave the quietude of his beloved wilderness. Although Isaac did not hearken to his brother, divine revelation moved him

[12] Qatar (25°30′N 51°15′E), bordering on Saudi Arabia, is a peninsula projecting into the Persian Gulf.

[13] Saint Isaac the Syrian, Homily Twenty-One, *The Ascetical Homilies* (MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), pp. 105, 106. The Syriac has it "none knows what thy fame is."

to administer to the Church of Nineveh.[14] He left his desert retreat and was consecrated bishop of the great city of Nineveh by the catholicos (katholikos), or patriarch, Giwargis (George, 661-680). The holy Isaac was not long in this office. He departed his see for a reason known to God. For us, it continues as a subject of speculation, which shall be discussed further below.

Saint Isaac is absent from *The Greek Synaxaristes* (in Greek), though he is commemorated in the Slavonic *Synaxaria*. As a Syrian mystical theologian, who flourished circa 680, it was probably not until the ninth century that some of his works were translated into Greek by the Monks Patrikios and Abramios of the Lavra of Saint Savvas in the Judaean Desert. Isaac's works were used by some Byzantine writers, as Peter Damaskenos, Symeon the Theologian, and Gregory Sinaites. Some of his writings were included in the *Philokalia* and *Evergetinos*.

Little has been left us about the saint's life. There exist two brief but detailed narratives. One account is given in the *Book of Chastity* of Isho'dnah, Bishop of Basra, dating from the early ninth century.[15] The text contains short stories of famous monks of the Persian Church who lived prior to him. The other account is that of Rahmani, taken from a fifteenth century manuscript in Mardin.[16]

The first source, that of Isho'dnah, opens at Chapter 124, entitled "On the holy Mar Ishaq (Saint Isaac), the Bishop of Nineveh, who abdicated from his episcopacy and composed books on the discipline of solitude." It begins: "Isaac was ordained Bishop of Nineveh by Mar Giwargis the catholicos of the monastery of Beit'Abhe. But after he held the office of the shepherd of Nineveh for five months (in succession to Moses, the bishop before him), he abdicated his episcopacy for a reason known to God. He then departed and dwelt in the mountains. After that, the throne was vacant for a time; and then the blessed Sabrisho was ordained after him. He likewise abandoned his episcopacy and became an anchorite. This took place in the days of Henanisho the catholicos. He then fell asleep in the monastery of Mar Shehin in the region of Qardu.

"Now after Isaac abandoned the throne of Nineveh, he ascended the mountain of Matout, which is encircled by the region of Beit Huzaye. He thereafter dwelt in stillness, together with the anchorites who lived thereabouts. Afterward, he went to the monastery of Rabban Shabur. He was exceedingly well versed in the divine writings, even to the point that he lost

[14] E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, p. 181.
[15] J. B. Chabot, "Le Livre de la Chasteté, compose part Jésusdenah Evêque de Basrah," in *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 16 (1896), pp. 63, 64(277, 278).
[16] I. E. Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca* (Lebanon: Charfet Seminary, 1904), p. 33(32-33).

his eyesight by reason of his reading and asceticism. He entered deeply into the divine mysteries and composed books on the divine discipline of solitude.

"It was said, however, that he made three points which were not accepted by many. Daniel Bar Tubanitha, the Bishop of Beit Garmai, was scandalized at Abba Isaac on account of these three propositions.

"Howbeit, when Isaac reached deep old age, he departed from temporal life, and his body was placed in the monastery of Shabur. He had been born in Beit Qatraye.

"Now I think that envy was stirred up against him by those who dwelt in the interior, even as was the case with Jausep (Joseph) Hazzaya, Johannan (John) of Apamea, and Johannan (John) of Dalyatha."

With regard to the account of the three propositions, since Abba Isaac was not inclined to argue on dogmatic subjects, he retired. The subjects of the three points or propositions expounded upon by the holy man and Daniel's opposition remain an enigma.

The second source, preserved by the West-Syrians, has an unknown author and date. Similar information is provided in this account. "Further, we record the history, or indeed the triumph, of the blessed Father Mar Ishaq (Isaac), which declares his homeland, his way of life, and how he was Bishop of Nineveh; but afterward, he forsook this office and went to a monastery where he composed five volumes of instruction for monks. This Mar Isaac of Nineveh was born in the region of Beit Qatraye beneath India. When he had become versed in the writings of the Church and the commentaries, he became a monk and a teacher in his own region. But when Mar Giwargis the catholicos came to Saint Isaac's region in 676, he took him to Beit Aramaya, because one of Saint Isaac's relatives was Mar Gabriel of Qatar, the scriptural interpreter of the Church. Mar Isaac was ordained Bishop of Nineveh in the monastery of Beit ʿAbhe. But because of the acuteness of his intellect and his zeal, he could only endure the pastoral care of his city for five months; then he returned to his stillness. He persuaded the papa (catholicos) to dismiss him, and the papa gave him the command to depart.

"Then Isaac left and dwelt in stillness in the mountain of Beit Huzaye, together with the monks who lived thereabouts. Ultimately, he became blind which required that the brethren write down his teachings. They called him the second Didymos, for indeed, he was quiet, kind, and humble, and his word was gentle. He ate only three loaves a week with some vegetables; he did not taste any food that was cooked. He composed five volumes, that are known even until this day, filled with sweet teaching....Thereafter, when he had grown old and advanced in years, he departed unto our Lord, and he was placed in the monastery of Mar Shabur. May the prayer of the Theotokos Mary and his prayer and that of all the saints be with us! Amen."

In 648 or perhaps a little later, the bishops of Qatar, Isaac' homeland, separated themselves from the catholicos, Isho'yahb III, and th bishops of the Tigris-Euphrates region. Instead, they held communion wit rebel bishops of eastern Persia. The cause for this schism is unknown. Fiv letters were sent by the catholicos.[17] He did not accuse them of heresy, but h does accuse them of rebellion. After 649, the catholicos convened a synod t depose the bishops who created the schism. He then bade the faithful o Qatar, monastics and layfolk, to shun the schismatics. These efforts failed. Some of the Qatari monks left the area or took refuge in remote spots, while others suffered persecution or were cast out because they refused to support the schismatical bishops.

Due to the disorder in the Church at Qatar, Isaac left his homeland and dwelt with monks in another region, in Persia. The place and duration is unknown to us. In 676, during the time when Giwargis was catholicos, the Church of Qatar was reunited with the mother Church of Persia. In that same year the catholicos went to Qatar to heal the schism. Abba Isaac at that time had returned to Qatar, conducting his life as a recluse. Giwargis learned of Abba Isaac and sought him for the episcopacy. Given Abba Isaac's love of stillness, it could not have been easy to persuade him to accept an office fraught with the tribulations of administering to and governing people. Abba Isaac, however, considered the good of the flock and the help he might render in reuniting Qatar with her mother Church. The Ninevites, however, were displeased to have a foreigner as bishop. As we mentioned earlier, he lasted but a short time in his see. Though it is accepted that he quickly retired from the see of Nineveh, the exact cause is unclear.

Isho'dnah suggests that there was jealousy surrounding the person of Abba Isaac. He comments that Daniel rose up against Abba Isaac, on account of Abba Isaac's writing of three propositions which he and others would not accept. "But I believe that jealousy awakened against Abba Isaac," says Isho'dnah.[18]

An Arabic manuscript has preserved the following narrative, derived from a West-Syrian source: "As Abba Isaac was sitting in the episcopal residence on the first day after his ordination, lo, there entered into the bishop's chamber two men who had a dispute with one another. The one man was demanding the return of a loan, while the other acknowledged to be the debtor. The debtor loudly begged for a short grace period, but his creditor re-

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[17] *Isho'yahb Patriarchae III, Liber Epistularum*, ed. and trans. R. Duval, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 11(12) (Louvain, 1904), pp. 260-283(188-204), Letters 17-21.

[18] Saint Isaac of Nineveh, "Introduction," *On Ascetical Life*, p. 11.

fused him any extension. Then the wretched lender, a rich man, said, 'If this man refuses to give back what is mine, I shall be forced to summon him to court.' The holy Mar Isaac answered him, 'If according to the Gospel commandment thou shouldest by no means ask back thy goods that another has taken away, how much more shouldest thou show magnanimity to a man who promises soon to repay his debt?' The impious lender replied, 'Put aside for now the teachings of the Gospel!' Then Saint Isaac said, 'If they do not obey the Gospel commandments of the Lord, what is there that remains for me to do here?' Seeing, therefore, that the office of Bishop was disturbing his solitary life with the unavoidable business of administration, the holy man abdicated from his episcopacy. He then fled to the desert."[19]

It is believed that the saint went to the mountainous region of Beit Huzaye, south of Nineveh. In his wilderness retreat, he was far from the controversies of the Persian Church. He dwelt for many years as a solitary on Mount Matout. While in utter solitude, he also spent time writing his homilies. Due to old age and the loss of his eyesight from weeping, he retired to the nearest monastery, that of Rabban Shabur. He spent the last years of his life among brethren who wrote down many of his teachings. The saint's writings were composed toward his more advanced years, after having lived both the life of a coenobite and anchorite. The writings of Saint Isaac have come down to us in the Syriac and Arabic tongues. Many of his works have been translated into Greek, and from Greek into Russian.

Amid the turmoil of the Persian Church, it is not difficult to determine Saint Isaac's position. The effects are evident of his thorough study of Saint Dionysios the Areopagite, the *Paradise of the Fathers*, certain writings of the great Cappadocians, Evagrios, Saint Makarios of Egypt, along with the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Abba Isaac modified and even supplanted some of Theodore's views. He is most certainly a Dyophysite. His confession of Faith is entirely Orthodox: "Humility is the raiment of the Godhead (Divinity). The Word Who became Man clothed Himself in it, and therewith He spoke to us in our body. Every man who has been clothed with it has truly been made like unto Him Who came down from His own exaltedness, and hid the splendor of His majesty, and concealed His glory with humility, lest creation should be utterly consumed by the contemplation of Him. Creation could not look upon Him unless He took a part of it to Himself, and thus

[19] This narration was translated into Latin by Assemani. See *Biblioteca Orientalis* I (Rome, 1719), p. 445; thereafter it was placed in the introduction to the Greek Edition of 1770 by Nikephoros Theotokis. See also Kadloubovsky and Palmer, *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, pp. 181, 182; *The Ascetic Homilies*, pp. lxviii, lxix.

conversed with it, and neither could it hear the words of His mouth face to face."[20]

He also wrote: "Find eternal life from your soul in Jesus Christ our Lord, Who is become the 'Mediator between God and man [1 Tim. 2:5]' as being the Uniter in His two natures. The orders of the angels cannot approach the glory that surrounds the throne of His majesty, yet He has appeared in the world for our sake in a mean and humble form, as Esaias said, 'We beheld Him, that He had no form nor beauty [Is. 53:2].' It is He Who, being invisible to all created nature, put on a body and fulfilled the œconomy for the salvation and life of all the nations which were cleansed by Him, and to Him be glory and dominion unto the ages of ages. Amen."[21]

From a Christological point of view it is safe to assume that Saint Isaac was with the party of moderates in the Persian Church. He disliked the practises of the extremists. He wrote in one of his homilies: "The sagacious understand the intent of Scripture. Likewise, things pertaining to the Lord's divinity, which are not compatible with human nature, are said with respect to His all-holy body; and again, lowly things are said concerning His divinity which pertain to His humanity. Many, not understanding the intent of the divine words, have stumbled here with a stumbling from which there is no recovery."[22]

Brief History of the Church of Persia

At this point we insert a concise history of the Persian Church up to the seventh century. In 489, Emperor Zeno (474-491), a pro-Monophysite, closed the Persian School, which then transferred itself to Nisibis, where it became the main theological and spiritual center of the Church of Persia. In 572, Henana became the head of the school. He desired to replace the commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428) with those of his own making, which were based on the allegorical method of Origen. A local council (585) forbade anyone from removing the works of Theodore, whose authority the council did not question. In 596 (Synod of Mar Sabrisho) and 605 (Synod of Gregor), Henana's interpretations were condemned in two other local councils. It was at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh centuries when Babai the Great became leader of the conservative party, which also adhered to Theodore's teachings.[23]

For nineteen years (609-628) the Church of Persia was without a catholicos. After the death of Gregor the catholicos, the Church remained

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[20] Homily Seventy-Seven, *The Ascetical Homilies*, p. 381.

[21] Homily Three, *The Ascetical Homilies*, p. 28.

[22] Ibid., p. 18.

[23] H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 19.

widowed, in accordance with the wish of the Persian king Chosroes II Parvez (591-628, second reign)....Consequently, Henanians and the Messalians spread everywhere. They took possession of churches and corrupted the faith of men. The great Babai, then, encouraged by numerous metropolitans and bishops, labored zealously to set in order the affairs of the Church and to prevent the accursed heretics from doing injury to the Christians.[24] Babai and his party pursued a radically conservative course that vehemently opposed the Monophysites and the Henanians, and the doctrine of a composite hypostasis. However, even among Babai's party of conservative zealots, the Chalcedonian Synod was rejected. This position was not shared by all.

In 628, when Kavad II Shiruya ascended the throne, he permitted the bishops of Persia to elect a catholicos. This election was realized in the person of Isho'yahb II of Gdala (628-646). The king died and Queen Boran bade the new catholicos to visit Aleppo where the Byzantine Emperor Herakleios (610-641)[25] was then found. The catholicos and his party of clergy went and were received graciously by the emperor. The catholicos engaged in a discussion of the Faith with the emperor and demonstrated that the Persian Church had not deviated and that their Dyophysitism[26] was not heretical.[27] Over one point they could not reach agreement. On the one hand, the Persians would not have Saint Kyril of Alexandria (378-444) commemorated in the diptychs; but on the other hand, Herakleios refused commemoration of Diodore of Tarsus (d. ca. 390), Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Nestorios (d. ca. 451).[28] As a result, all the names arousing distaste to either party were omitted. Two Liturgies were celebrated, whereupon the emperor communed with the

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[24] See *The Ascetical Homilies*, p. 535(211); *Chronique de Séert*, 84 P.O. XIII, pp. 531, 532.

[25] Herakleios fought the Persian generals Shahrbarāz and Shāhīn. He broke the Sasanian state, and, in 628, Kavad Shiruya was forced to conclude a truce.

[26] Dyophysites, "two natures," was a title by the Monophysites for the Orthodox. It had been a distinguishing mark of the Antiochene school of theologians. Dyophysites were those who accepted the definition given at the Chalcedon Synod (451), which states that Jesus Christ had two distinct natures, one divine and one human, in one person (hypostasis).

[27] See *The Ascetical Homilies*, p. 507; *Chron.*, pp. 558, 559.

[28] The controversy over the relationship between the divine and human natures in Christ was rooted in the differing views of the schools of Alexandria and Antioch. The theologians of Antioch, the most notable of whom in this controversy was Nestorios, who had views which followed after Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. The Alexandrians were represented by Kyril of Alexandria, who managed to have Nestorios removed from the see of Constantinople as a heretic. The Synod of Chalcedon was convoked in 451 to settle the issue of the natures of Christ.

Persians. The catholicos, upon returning home, was criticized by extreme conservatives.

Not much time passed before the Moslem Arabs conquered the Sasanid (Iranian) dynasty of the Zoroastrians; so that by the end of the seventh century, the Sasanian empire, after five hundred years, came to an end (226-651). Political troubles, plague, famine, and the spoiling of the irrigation system caused Sasanian Persia to fall to the Arab armies. There was no longer any controversy over one or two hypostases. Let no one forget, however, that the first six centuries of Syrian Christianity were times of persecution. It was a Church which, due to political and ecclesial reasons, remained insular. She had her own liturgical life, hierarchy, dogmas, and discipline. During those years when the Roman empire was pagan, the Persian king had little reason to persecute his Christian subjects. When the Roman empire became Orthodox, Shāpūr deemed the Christians in his borders as traitors.[29] Despite horrifying persecutions, missionary expansion would reach as far as central China in 638.

In the year 629, the Persians renounced all Byzantine territory. The Moslem Arabs then conquered Syria and Babylonia in 636. In 638, Iso'yaw III of Adiabene began his ecclesiastical career as Bishop of Nineveh. The letters of this bishop reflect the tension of that period. He writes of going down to Tabrit, "the great city of the heretics, to do battle with the Monophysites."[30] Prior to his death, in 661, he chose as his successor a monk at Beit'Abhe, named Giwargis of Kaphra. He loved Giwargis for his wisdom, learning, and humility. When Iso'yaw reposed at eighty years of age, the patriarchate passed on to Giwargis, who had been named bishop of the Arabs at Akoula in 636. Giwargis was also a translator of Greek works into Syriac. It was this same Giwargis who would consecrate the holy Isaac to the bishopric of Nineveh.

Theodore, Diodore, and Nestorios

Since the biblical commentary of Saint Ephraim the Syrian (ca. 306-383) was not complete, Syriac Christianity made the decision to translate from

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[29] Under Shāpūr II (309-379), Persia had more martyrs than any other part of the Christian world. The Roman Martyrology lists nine thousand martyrs, and Sozomen sixteen thousand. Ardashir II (379-383), Shāpūr's brother, perpetuated the carnage, as did Yazdgird I (399-420), until the edict of toleration in 409. See Saint Isaac of Nineveh, "Introduction," *On Ascetical Life*, (NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), p. 8.

[30] The patriarchal letters of Iso'yaw, edited and translated by R. Duval, from *Liber epistularum*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 64, Ser. 2 (Louvain, 1905).

the Greek the entire body of exegetical works of Theodore of Mopsuestia, whom Saint Isaac referred to as "the blessed interpreter." As a result, Theodore's methods and views, including his Christological opinions, were incorporated into East-Syrian tradition.[31] These very opinions became a subject of heated discussions in the Greek-speaking east after the Synod of Ephesus (431), which condemned Nestorios. At that time, writers of extreme Dyophysite leanings were reckoned to be Nestorians. Theodore of Mopsuestia, pupil of Diodore of Tarsus, at Antioch, had been accused of Nestorianism and Pelagianism by the Byzantines. His writings were among those condemned by the Second Synod of Constantinople or Fifth Œcumenical Synod (553). Saint Photios the Great (d. 897), however, commended Theodore's refutation of Evnomios. The biblical commentaries of Theodore, so sought after by the Syriac Church are historical and philological in approach, with minimal allegorization. His most important theological work was entitled *On the Incarnation*. It was aimed chiefly at Apollinarios with his definition of Christ as a union of two natures. Despite his posthumous condemnation at the Fifth Synod, the East-Syrian Christians remained loyal to him. This explains how the Church of Persia and the whole East-Syrian theological tradition came to be called "Nestorian," though the name was neither used by this Church nor was there any historical link to Nestorios.[32]

The Alexandrian tradition, represented in the person of Saint Kyril of Alexandria, came into conflict with Nestorios. Saint Kyril's statement that there is "one nature of God the Logos incarnate," cast the suspicion of "mixture" and "confusion" on the two natures for those of the East-Syrian tradition. Though the Ephesian Synod (431) confirmed Saint Kyril, the East-Syrian theological tradition rejected his terminology in favor of that of Theodore and Diodore.

Later, the Chalcedonian Synod (451) returned to the Antiochene school's strict distinction between the two natures of Christ. Why did the East-Syrian tradition not accept the Ephesian Synod? The name of Nestorios was barely known in Persia until the sixth century. The main reason for their refusal was that the synod had been conducted by Saint Kyril of Alexandria and his adherents in the absence of John of Antioch, who, upon his arrival at Ephesus, anathematized Kyril. The Church of Persia was displeased that the

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[31] East-Syrian is a term frequently used to describe the Persian Church rather than "Nestorian." The Christology of Nestorios was not really at issue in East-Syrian theology.

[32] H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 18.

synod was "Alexandrian," taking no account of their Antiochene position, which was the Christology of the Church of the East, not Nestorian.[33]

The Meaning of Terms: Substance (*Qnoma*) and Hypostasis

It is more difficult to respond to the question of why the East-Syrians refused the Chalcedonian Council. The Greek word hypostasis meant a specific person, Jesus Christ, the Logos, whereas the word *physis* (nature) referred to His humanity and divinity. When these words were translated into Syriac, the terminological expression could not be adequately expressed. The Syriac word *qnoma* (used to translated hypostasis) carried the meaning of the individual expression of *kyana* (nature). Syriac writers normally spoke of natures and their *qnome*. Whereas Severus of Antioch thought that one hypostasis implies one nature, some Dyophysite writers claimed that two natures imply two hypostases.[34]

Catholicos Isho'yahb II explained why the Church of the East would not and could not accept the Chalcedonian definition of the Faith: "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 'two natures (divine and human),' yet by their formula of 'one *qnoma* (substance),' it seems, they tempted weak minds. As an outcome of the affair, a contradiction occurred, for with the formula of 'one *qnoma* (substance)' they corrupted the confession of 'two natures,' while with the 'two natures' they rebuked and refuted the 'one *qnoma* (substance).' So they found themselves standing at the crossroads: and they wavered and turned aside from the blessed ranks of the Orthodox, yet they did not join the assemblies of the heretics....On what side we should number them, I do not know; for their terminology cannot stand up, even as Nature and Scripture testify. For in these, many *qnoma* (substances) can be found in a single 'nature,' but that there should be various 'natures' in a single *qnoma* (substance) has never been the case and has not been heard of."[35] These words show very clearly why the Chalcedonian definition of Faith was unacceptable to the Syrian ear: it sounded illogical. Moreover, the catholicos' reluctance to reckon with the issue indicates that the Synod of Chalcedon was irrelevant to the east. It was not even a synod in

[33] Ibid., pp. 21, 22.

[34] Ibid., p. 22.

[35] Ibid., p. 23. Quoted from S. Brock, *The Nestorian Church: A Lamentable Misnomer*, in J. F. Coakley and K. and K. Parry, edd., *The Church of the East: Life and Thought*, Bulletin of the John Ryland's Library, vol. 78/3, Manchester 1997.

which his own Church would have participated. It was a synod which took place within the Roman empire. The Church of the East, located within the Persian empire, had no direct links with that synod of the Byzantine world. If it happened that synods were recognized in the non-Byzantine east, it took place later than the date at which the synods convened. The First Œcumenical Synod (325) had not been recognized by the Persian Church until eighty-five years after the synod met.[36] The Second Œcumenical Synod (381) was not accepted until the fifth century.

Babai understands that a precise definition of terminology is imperative, if he is to demonstrate that both the divine nature and human nature in Christ must have a hypostasis. The two terms to which Babai gives a special definition are hypostasis (*qnoma*) and person (*parsopa*). But the *qnoma* in Babai's interpretation is not the Chalcedonian meaning of hypostasis. Although originally *qnoma* was the Syriac translation of the Greek hypostasis, it cannot be identified with it....*Qnoma* may be translated, "this or that substance," "substratum," "subsistence," "reality" opposed to the unreal or illusion. It is primarily referring to concrete reality or actuality rather than person (*prosopon* or *persona*). So to translate *qnoma* as "hypostasis" or as "person" is incorrect and highly misleading....*Parsopa* (person) is the property which distinguishes one *qnoma* (substance) from another *qnoma* (substance) of the same species. It is the sum total of the accidents, and properties, giving the particular characteristic to the *qnoma* (substance). The indivisible and singular property of the *qnoma* (substance) is given by the *parsopa* (person). In G. Chediath's analysis, they are defined as follows: '*Qnoma* (substance) is the concretization of the abstract *kyana* (nature) such as this or that. *Kyana* (nature) never exists except as *qnoma* (substance).'" [37]

Babai had insisted on the doctrine of "two *qnome*" in the incarnate Christ, employing the Syriac term meaning "being, substance," which was used to translate the Greek word hypostasis, which for Babai meant something different. Thereupon, Babai's reference to two *qnome* came into conflict with the Chalcedonian definition "one hypostasis, two natures."[38]

In his Fourth *Memra* (seventeenth chapter) Babai defines his terms for us. First let us consider his definition of *qnoma* (hypostasis, substance, essence): "A singular essence is called a *qnoma*. It stands alone, one in

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[36] H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, pp. 23, 24.

[37] Saint Isaac the Syrian, "Epilogue," *The Ascetical Homilies*, pp. 504, 505; and G. Chediath, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great* (Kottayam, India, 1982), pp. 89, 90.

[38] H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 19.

number, that is, one as distinct from the many. A *qnoma* is invariable in its natural state and is bound to a species and nature, being one numerically among a number of like *qnome*. It is distinctive among its fellow *qnome* only by reason of any unique property or characteristic which it possesses in its *parsopa*. With rational creatures this uniqueness may consist of various external and internal accidents, such as excellent or evil character, or knowledge or ignorance, and with irrational creatures, as also with the rational, the combination of various contrasting features. Through the *parsopa* we distinguish that Gabriel is not Michael, and Paul is not Peter. However, in each *qnoma* of any given nature the entire common nature is known, and intellectually one recognizes of what that nature consists, which encompasses all of its *qnome*."[39]

For Saint Basil the Great (ca. 330-379), hypostasis included the distinguishing property; for Babai *parsopa* (person) is the distinguishing property. Thus, because the hypostatic characteristic of the Son and Word of God is Sonship (begottenness), Babai can call this His *parsopa*,[40] 'the *parsopa* of Sonship' (or 'Sonness' υἱότης). On the subject of *parsopa*, Babai has this to say: "Again, *parsopa* is the collective characteristics of a *qnoma* which distinguish it from other *qnome* of the same species. The *qnoma* of Paul is not that of Peter, even though the nature and *qnoma* of both men are the same. Each possesses a body and a living soul,...yet through their *parsopa* they are distinguished from one another by that which is unique to each man, that is, stature, form, temperament, authority, fatherhood, sonship, masculinity, femininity, etc. Because of the unique property (*parsopa*) which a certain *qnoma* possesses, one *qnoma* is not the other one."[41] The *qnoma* of Paul does not otherwise differ from Peter except in numerical distinction. Paul's appearance and conduct are characteristics of his *parsopa*. The integrity of identity is bound up in the fact that Paul's *parsopa* is uniquely his and not another's, whereas the integrity of his *qnoma* lies in its faithful reflection, in exemplary form, of the exact nature of any other ordinary man.

With such definitions Babai can easily maintain that each of the two concretely existing natures in Christ must necessarily have their own hypostasis: the hypostasis of the divine nature being the second Hypostasis of the Holy Trinity, and the hypostasis of the human nature being the perfect and particular Man Jesus, whom we distinguish from the Apostles Peter and John. To have concrete existence, a nature must have a hypostasis. Therefore, to

[39] Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, A. Vaschalde, ed. (Paris, 1915), pp. 159, 160.

[40] See *The Book of Union*, pp. 160, 161(130).

[41] Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, A. Vaschalde, p. 160.

speak of one hypostasis in Christ, means either that one nature has ceased to have real existence or that it has been totally absorbed into the other nature (as Eftyches apparently taught).[42] This latter idea was also taught by Henana of Adiabene of the Persian Church and the School of Nisibis (572), which heresy Babai the Great vehemently fought.

A mixed or composite hypostasis is impossible, because this could only come about if both natures were imperfect of themselves before the union (as the body and soul in man),or that they were so joined as to alter the concrete existence of each: in such a case, the divine nature would become subject to suffering and change. Henana, according to Babai, therefore teaches Theopaschism. With Babai's definition of hypostasis (*qnoma*) there can be no union on the hypostatic level: "Thus it is evident that it is in no wise possible for the divinity and the humanity of Christ to become one hypostasis (*qnoma*), but only one *parsopa* (person), in which is made known unitedly the two natures in their hypostaticality."[43]

The union achieved in the incarnation is in the *parsopa* (person), the only ontological medium for Babai. Christ is not a mere man united to God by grace or by moral achievement or by an anointing of the Spirit, as Paul of Samosata and the other heretics say. The human nature of Jesus, in its own hypostasis, never existed separately from the Logos Who gave to it His unique property of Sonship. "Christ's humanity was at all times like iron in the fire of His divinity, not losing its essential natural properties or human hypostasis, not changing its nature, but taking on the attributes of divinity as, the iron takes on the aspect of flame and its burning action. In this union of *parsopa*, the iron can be broken but not the flame; the flame burns by nature but the iron does not. Likewise, in the incarnation, the human nature can be put to death but not the divinity; the divinity is almighty by nature but the humanity is not."[44]

The East-Syrian Tradition

This necessary and brief excursus from the biography of Saint Isaac was done that we might examine the history of the Christological controversies of the fifth century, especially the question regarding the "Nestorianism" of the Church of the East. If by this term we understand the teaching against which Saint Kyril of Alexandria fought—that is, the teaching about the two different persons in the Son of God which led to the recognition of "two

[42] See "Epilogue" of *The Ascetical Homilies*, p. 505.

[43] Ibid., loc. cit., and *Against One Hypostasis*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 79, (Louvain), pp. 297(239-240), 300(242), 305(246), and 306(246).

[44] See "Epilogue" of *The Ascetical Homilies*, p. 506, and *Against One Hypostasis*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 79, p. 304(245).

Sons," then this doctrine was alien to the East-Syrian tradition. Yet East-Syrian theologians did speak of two *qnome* (substances)-hypostases in connection with the incarnate Son of God. The Church of Persia, therefore, having not recognized the Chalcedonian doctrine of 'one hypostasis, two natures,' found itself in verbal opposition to the Byzantine Church. From the fifth to the eighth centuries, writers of the Church of the East continued to use the Christological terminology of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore; but in the Greek-speaking east, this usage was generally identified as Nestorian."[45] By the end of the seventh century, political circumstances cut the Church of the East off from the Byzantine world.

The most significant Christological document produced in the end of the seventh century is the letter of Mar Giwargis the catholicos, written (originally in Persian) in 680 to Mina the *chorepiscopos*, in the province of Fars, on the subject of our Lord's incarnation.[46] Mina was at a loss to answer certain arguments of Monophysite missionaries that had made inroads to his region. Mar Giwargis' epistle is excellent testimony to the conservative trend, set by Babai, which was being slowly assimilated by the moderates who eventually regained control of Persian Church life. The formula of two hypostases is distinctly stated,[47] and the union of *parsopa*. Thus, he wrote: "God the Word came willingly...and fashioned marvellously a body in which there was an intelligent soul and dwelt in it, uniting it with Himself in one union of His own Sonship. For although in His perceptibility and imperceptibility He was consubstantial with us in body and soul, yet in the union with God the Word His Taker, Who united Him with Himself, that through Him He might reveal His hiddenness, and in Him might show forth the greatness of the power of His divinity for our salvation and for the renewal of all, we confess and say that He is one Son in His divinity and in His manhood. Although He is two natures—God in nature and *qnoma*, and man in nature and *qnoma*—yet we confess and glorify one Son of God, now and at His coming again and for ever.

"When we say 'Anointed'—Man Who was anointed by divinity, and divinity which anointed manhood, according to the prediction of the prophecy of the blessed David, 'Because of this God, Thy God, anoints Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows [Ps. 44:7]'— it is not as those who were anointed with the blessed oil, for the manhood of Christ was anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, as it is well written, and although we also confess and believe that Christ is God, yet indeed, when we say 'God,' it is not, by

[45] H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 24.
[46] *Synodikon Orientale*, p. 227-244(490-514).
[47] Ibid., p. 234(500); *The Ascetical Homilies*, pp. 512, 538(267).

any means, 'Christ' we are defining, for the Father is God but is not 'Christ, and the Holy Spirit is God but is not 'Christ,' and although we see and know the Man Christ, yet we also believe in and confess that He is God because of the Word of God Who took Him to Himself and joined Him with Himself in an inseparable union, and made Him His dwelling place forever."[48] Thus, according to Giwargis: "Christ is truly consubstantial with us in His humanity, and likewise consubstantial with God the Father in His divinity: two real, hypostatic natures in the one Christ, the Son of God."[49]

The catholicos, commenting on the transfiguration of the Lord, sees Christ's real human nature as identical to ours, "enveloped with the rays of the glory of His divinity." He also says: "Jesus' divinity was not altered or confined, nor did it cause His humanity to vanish. And His humanity was not swallowed up in His divinity, but rather the assumed portion of our humanity retained its existence in the union with His divinity, that His divinity might be revealed in our humanity, that our salvation be accomplished by His divinity, and that the lowliness into which we slipped might be raised up to the lofty rank of His divinity, according to His grace from all ages. Who, then, would have been able to work such great goodness for corporeal and spiritual beings, save only God our Creator Who became Man, in the nature that is of us, and revealed in us our salvation?"[50]

Mar Giwargis' argued against the Monophysites, maintaining that "man's salvation depends on our Lord Jesus being truly consubstantial with us in order that, as being part of our nature, He, as God and consubstantial with the Father, might bring to us the revelation and glory of divinity, from which we had fallen. If, however, either of His two natures were imperfect, this could not be accomplished; and if He were one nature, He would not be truly consubstantial either with the Father or with us."[51]

The Dyophysite belief, which is held by the Orthodox Churches, was also declared by the Persian Church: "This Faith, which we hold to the capacity of our knowledge, is that of great Rome and all Italy, of Constantinople as well, of Jerusalem, and of all the renowned cities and catholic churches of the cities of the Rūm (that is, the Byzantines or Rhomaioi) which have not

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[48] *Is the Theology of the Church of the East Nestorian?* Assyrian Church of the East, 2002. Commission on Inter-Church Relations and Education Development. See web site at http://www.nestorian.org. Taken from the Pro Oriente Consultation (Vienna, 24-29 June, 1994), Subheading 'Giwargis, Letter to Mina," p. 27. See also *Synodikon Orientale*, p. 241(508); *The Ascetical Homilies*, p. 512.

[49] *Synodikon Orientale*, p. 241(508); *The Ascetical Homilies*, p. 512.

[50] *Synodikon Orientale*, pp. 236, 237(503); *The Ascetical Homilies*, loc. cit.

[51] *Synodikon Orientale*, p. 237(504); *The Ascetical Homilies*, loc. cit.

been defiled by the foetid mire that the heretics spill forth from the well-springs of their hearts and the speech of their lips; for they hold fast to the truth of the confession of two natures with their properties and their operations (energies) in the single unity of Christ. But with especial clarity, exactitude, and lucidity, according to apostolic tradition and without any stain, this Faith is held by the catholic Church which is in this dominion of the Orient, that is, the land of Persia and the regions surrounding it."[52]

Why was the seventh-century Persian Church imputed by historians to be Nestorian? Theologically, they were supporters of the Chalcedonian Synod, but they did not accept that synod's condemnation of Nestorios. When Nestorios introduced the term "Christotokos," as an appellation for the Theotokos,[53] the Constantinopolitans accused Nestorios of reckoning Christ as a mere man (Psilanthropism) and deification by the action of the Holy Spirit (Adoptionism).

Saint Kyril wrote: "One must not, therefore, divide into two Sons the one Lord Jesus Christ; nor will it in any wise avail the right expression of the Faith to do so, though some should claim a union of persons (Gk. *prosopa*)."[54] Nestorios mistakenly taught that the Logos and His complete human nature were two separate beings with their own independent identities (*prosopa*) and existences. Thereupon, Saint Kyril introduced the expression "union according to hypostasis" (ἕνωσις καθ' ὑπόστασιν), by which he meant that "the Logos, in truth, is united to a human nature without

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[52] *Synodikon Orientale*, p. 244(514); *The Ascetical Homilies*, loc. cit.

[53] The Persian Church is silent regarding the term "Theotokos" (God's birthgiver). She believed that the Logos was born of the Virgin, but could not accept any implication that His immaterial, uncircumscribable divinity became, in some way, corporeal and proceeded physically from the Virgin's womb. Babai acknowledged that the infinite dwelt in the finite, but it was the idea of ascribing change to divinity that the Persians loathed. Even though both Theodore and Diodore accepted the term "Theotokos," its use by the Monophysites came to be associated in the Persian mind with the doctrine of Monophysitism of blending and Theopaschism. Thus, the Persian Church avoided the term. Saint John of Damascus explains Orthodox usage of the appellation, writing: "We do not say that God was born of her in the sense that the divinity of the Logos took its beginning of being from her, but in the sense that God the Logos Himself, Who was timelessly begotten of the Father before all ages,...did, in the last days, come for our salvation to dwell in her womb, and of her was made flesh and born without undergoing change." See *Precise Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 3:12, *P.G.* 94:1028. Cited in *The Ascetical Homilies*, p. 539(281).

[54] Second Epistle to Nestorios. See E. Schwartz, Acta Conciliorum Œcumenicorum I, 1, 1, p. 28. This letter was produced at the Synod of Ephesus. It was voted upon and acknowledged as expressing the Faith of the entire Church. See *The Ascetic Homilies*, p. 513.

undergoing any change or confusion; and He is conceived to be, and really is, one Christ, the same, both God and Man."[55] In 433, the bishops of Antioch stated to Saint Kyril that they also believed our Lord Jesus Christ to be "perfect God and perfect Man, consisting of a rational soul and body, begotten of the Father before the ages according to His divinity, and in the last days the same, for us and our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, according to His humanity; the same essence (*homoousios*) with the Father according to His divinity, and the same essence with us according to His humanity, for there has been a union of two natures. Therefore, we confess one Christ, one Son, one Lord."[56] As a result, Saint Kyril accepted them into communion.

From the foregoing, it is evident that, through the sixth century, the Church of Persia never espoused a Nestorian doctrine, but rather maintained an Antiochene Dyophysite belief. In the early seventh century, when Babai flourished, the Persian Church appeared to be heretical on account of the extremism of the radical conservatives who rejected every other form of Dyophysite Christianity as heretical. Nevertheless, by the time of Mar Giwargis and his successors, the moderates were at the helm of the Persian Church.

Although the Persian Church was not Nestorian in a strict doctrinal sense, her evolved Christological expression no longer resembled that of the Synod of Chalcedon, on account of her lack of information regarding the term hypostasis as understood in the Churches to the west of Persia. The philosophical terms employed by Nestorios to describe the incarnate Christ—two natures (*physis*), and two hypostases (*hypostases*), in one person (*prosopon*)—are also employed by the theologians of the Church of the East. There was also the misunderstanding regarding the commemorations of Saint Kyril, Nestorios, and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Due to the ancient autonomy and continual isolation from the rest of Christendom, the Church of Persia did not feel herself enjoined to accept the decrees of the western Churches. Two factors therefore brought about the application of the term Nestorian to the Church of Persia: the confession of two hypostases and the commemorations of Theodore and Nestorios. The rise of the number of Monophysites in Persia also gave rise to extremism. The more numerous party of moderates, however, were less vocal.

The legacy of Babai and his companions abides to this day. Nestorios is venerated by the Church of the East and his vocabulary is used, though the

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[55] E. Schwartz, Acta Conciliorum Œcumenicorum I, 1, 6, p. 115; *The Ascetic Homilies*, pp. 513, 538(277).

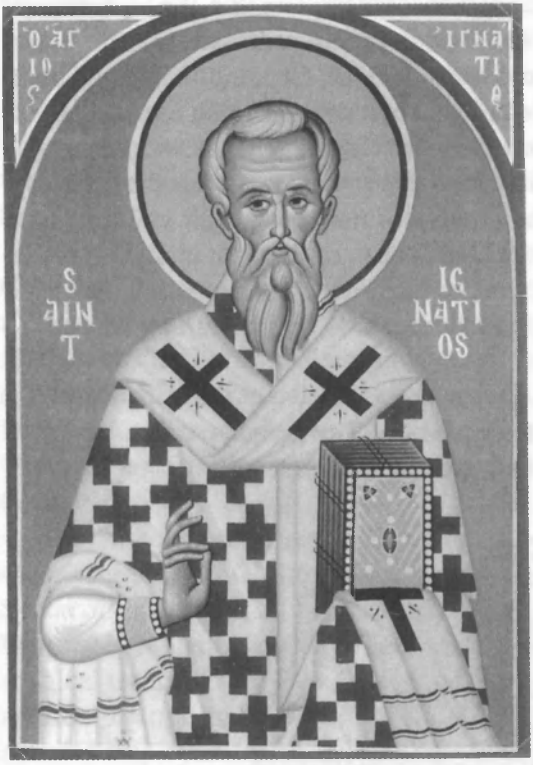
[56] *The Formulary of Reunion*, Acta Conciliorum Œcumenicorum I, 1, 4, p. 17; *The Ascetic Homilies*, pp. 513, 539(278).

Assyrian Church rejects the epithet "Nestorian." According to the 2000 Commission of Inter-Church Relations and Education Development of the Assyrian Church of the East they confess "two natures in Christ, inseparable and unconfused, subsisting in one personal object, God the Word, God over all, Who is consubstantial with His Begetter in His own essential nature, and consubstantial with us in the nature which he took from the Virgin and made His own. Whether the formulae employed by this confession are adequate to express a true metaphysical union of the two disparate natures we are unable to say with any degree of certainty, for we are well aware that the 'mystery' of the incarnation has eluded the powers of human thought and tongue to express to the satisfaction of all....The Church of the East confesses, as do people of good will everywhere, that her tongue is too stammering, her mind too limited, and her vocabulary too inadequate to do justice to a concept so sublime."[57]

Through the intercessions of Thy Saints,
O Christ God, have mercy on us. Amen.

[57] *Is the Theology of the Church of the East Nestorian?* See http://www.nestorian.org. Taken from the Pro Oriente Consultation (Vienna, 24-29 June 1994), Subheadings "IV. Conclusion" and "A. A Confession of Inadequacy," pp. 17, 18.

On the 29th of January, the holy Church commemorates the translation of the relics of the holy Hieromartyr IGNATIOS the God-bearer.[1]



Saint Ignatios the God-bearer

Ignatios, the God-bearer, became a successor of the apostles. He was second Bishop of Antioch (A.D. 53), after Evodos, who is commemorated by the holy Church on the 7th of September. Ignatios became a disciple of the divine Evangelist John, together with the sacred Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who is commemorated by the holy Church on the 23rd of February. Ignatios was ordained to the priesthood by the holy apostles. He suffered martyrdom in Rome. There is unanimous agreement that Saint Ignatios suffered martyrdom during the reign of Trajan (98-117), but to fix the precise year of his repose is difficult. Most accept the date of the second half of Trajan's reign (ca. 110-117). At Trajan's command, the holy Ignatios was to be fed to the lions. But even this death was desired by the saint. After the saint addressed the crowd, the executioners released the lions. When the lions caught sight of him, they sprang upon him and devoured him. The creatures left only his large bones; therefore the bellies of the wild animals became his tomb. After the crowds dispersed from the theater and departed, the Christians remained behind that they might take up and bury the holy man's relics with honor and reverence. The relics were interred in a distinguished place on the 20th day of December, the date when the holy Church commemorates his martyrdom. With the passage of time, the relics were returned to Antioch. The august translation of the sacred relics of Saint Ignatios is commemorated by the holy Church on the 29th of January. He was buried in Daphne; and later, after his relics had been wrapped in

[1] An encomium was composed by Saint John Chrysostom regarding the translation of the relics of Saint Ignatios [*P.G.* 50:587].

linen, they were removed to Antioch by Emperor Theodosios II (408-450). Thus, an inestimable treasure was left to the holy Church. When the Moslems captured the city of Antioch in 637, the relics of Saint Ignatios were moved to several places for safekeeping.

On the 29th of January, the holy Church commemorates the holy SEVEN MARTYRS of Samosata: PHILOTHEOS, HYPERECHIOS, HABIB, JULIAN, ROMANOS, IAKOVOS, and PAREGORIOS.

Philotheos, and those holy martyrs with him who became soldiers of the heavenly King and Christ, censured and held up to public scorn the deceit and error of idolatry. They were living in the city of Samosata[2] during the time of Galerius.[3] In 296, the Persians seized control of Armenia from Tiridates and were heading toward Antioch. Galerius advanced but was worsted, suffering a heavy defeat on the plains of Northern Mesopotamia between Carrhae and Callinicum. Within months, Galerius launched a surprise attack on the Persians in Armenia, in which he succeeded. Before his battle, Galerius summoned the populace to offer worship at the Temple of Fortune at Samosata where he was encamped. Philotheos and Hyperechios refused to attend. Instead, they went to offer up true worship in the chapel within Hyperechios' home, where they were joined by five fellow Samosatans, Habib, Julian, Romanos, Iakovos, and Paregorios. As they prayed together, an imperial officer with soldiers arrived. They came to arrest the well-known confessors of Jesus, Philotheos and Hyperechios. The other five Christians were also taken into custody. The idolaters inflicted many heinous tortures upon the seven martyrs. Thick rods were used to break their arms and thighs. Afterward, they were pitilessly flayed. They were bound at their necks with heavy chains and cast into prison. They were removed a second time and subjected to further flaying and scraping of their flesh. Next the torturers suspended on wood the blessed confessors and fixed their heads to the wood with nails. Thus, they surrendered their souls into the hands of God.

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[2] Samosata (now Samsat in Turkey, 37°30′N 38°32′E) lies on the north bank of the Euphrates. During the Persian wars it was used as a campsite for the Byzantine army.

[3] Galerius (Gaius Galerius Valerius Maximianus), Roman emperor from 305-311, was born near Serdica (now Sofia) in Thrace, of humble parentage. He was nominated Caesar in 293 by Diocletian, to help in governing the east. He was a fanatical idolater and ruthless ruler. While in power, he persecuted the Christians until the winter of 310-311. At that time, he fell victim to a painful and disgusting disease, which he believed to be a retribution from the Christian God. Therefore, in 311, he issued an edict in which he grudgingly granted toleration of the Christians. He died shortly thereafter.