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THE CHURCH OF THE EAST: RECLAIMING FORGOTTEN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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This thesis explores the unique history of the Christian Church of the East in Syria and Persia in late antiquity. The Church of the East played an important role in the stability of Christianity in the Middle East during the rise of Islam, specifically regarding the Islamic conquests of Sassanid Persia in the seventh century CE. In order to reach this point, this thesis explores the monotheistic traditions in ancient Syria and Persia, beginning with Judaism and pagan cultic practices, followed by the rise of Jesus of Nazareth. It then covers the emergence of unique theological differences between Christians practicing in the East, and the Roman Chalcedonian Church. In doing so, the misconceptions of the Church of the East, frequently referred to inaccurately as the ‘Nestorians,’ are debunked. Following this, political conflicts between the Roman Byzantine Empire and the Persian Sassanid Empire are argued to have forced theological decisions to be made by Eastern Christians in order to avoid persecution. By the Islamic conquests in the seventh century, the Church of the East was stable enough to survive a total political takeover. The challenges of living as a minority religion under, at times oppressive, theocratic imperial rule were overcome due to the Church of the East’s unique ability to self-evaluate its own doctrines and argue its potential to coexist with challenging religions.
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In 781 CE the Abbasid Muslim Caliph al-Mahdi invited the Patriarch of the Christian Church of the East, Timothy of Baghdad, to answer a series of questions on the Christian faith. As the patriarch of Baghdad, Timothy represented the highest source of theology and instruction in his version of Christianity east of the Roman Empire. By the time of the encounter between the two men, Islamic political control of the region had grown rapidly since the overthrow of the Persian Sassanid Empire in 651 CE. This conversation between the Caliph and Patriarch occurred in several letters concerning the theology of Christians in Syria and Persia. Timothy explained the nature of the Holy Trinity, specifically the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity’s belief in one God, and other major tenets of Christianity. This dialogue between Islamic and Christian leaders in Baghdad marked a significant moment in the history of global Christianity. By 781 CE, a unified Church of the East now represented by a Patriarch had been successfully located outside the Roman Empire, recognized officially by the powerful Islamic Caliphate that had moved from Damascus to Baghdad in 762 CE.

But the eighth century encounter only makes sense if we begin much earlier to examine the origins and especially the consolidation of Christianity in the previous three centuries. This thesis analyzes how decentralized groups of Christians formed a single cohesive church in the far eastern region of the Middle East. The Church of the East enjoyed a closer relationship with the Islamic political reality in the eighth century, that would have been impossible among neighboring contemporary Christians who variously self-identified as ‘Chalcedonians’ or ‘Miaphysites,’ terms and identities we will also have to clarify in some detail in order to highlight the particular character of the Church of the East. This thesis will examine how these
identities were shaped by imperially called Councils within the Roman Empire between 431 and 451 CE, in whose deliberations and conclusions the Christians in the then-Persian Empire had not participated. Informed by a long history of debate, the differences in Christology that developed out of ecumenical councils within the Roman Empire caused a break between Roman Christians and those Eastern Christians, east of the Byzantine Empire.

Interest in the history of the Church of the East has risen in recent years. Historians have actively discredited traditional concepts of Christian history outside of the Roman Empire. For example, such historians have disproved the notion that Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, introduced this version of Christianity to the East. The original sources that support this new perspective come from a collection of documents from Syrian writers in the sixth and seventh centuries. These newly translated sources provide insight into the self-identity of Syrian Christianity because of their detailing of the community’s reaction to Islamic conquests. The closer examination of these Eastern Christian sources that date from the time of the Islamic conquest has sparked a reevaluation of how the East Syrian Christians fit into the fabric of Middle Eastern society. Christianity has largely been remembered through a Western lens, but the recovery of the long struggle for a Christian profile among those who self-identified as the Church of the East has shed new light on the first half-millennium of the Christian era.

Philip Jenkins addressed the problems of a westernized Christian history in his book, *The Lost History of Christianity*. In it, he concentrated on disproving many mistakes historians have made concerning Christians in the Middle East. He states, “during the Middle Ages, mass defections and persecutions across Asia and the Middle East uprooted what were then some of the world’s most numerous Christian communities, churches that possessed a vibrant lineal and
cultural connection to the earliest Jesus movement of Syria and Palestine."¹ He argues further that, up to the 14th century, Christianity was divided globally among three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe. He maintains that the modern notion of Christianity as a ‘Western’ religion is a misrepresentation. A reevaluation of the history of Christianity should lead to increased importance being placed on the Christian communities outside of the Roman Empire, among them, the communities in Syria and Persia. His book describes how many scholars argued in the past that the condemned bishop of Constantinople Nestorius (d. 451 CE) played a major part in shaping the faith of Syrian Christians, even referring to the Church of the East as ‘Nestorians.’ However, this descriptor is inaccurate and underrates the unique history in Syria and Persia for monotheists long before the rise of Christianity. For this reason, this thesis begins with those deeper monotheistic roots in the region of the Sassanid Persian Empire.

Michael Philip Penn’s book, *Envisioning Islam*, supports the argument Jenkins makes, and he provides an explanation of the recent shift in understanding global Christianity among modern scholars. Penn examines the documents written by Syrian Christians in the sixth through ninth centuries. His work has been extremely important to this recent reinterpretation of Syrian Christian history and provides one of the most important original source collections this thesis explores at length. He argues that although many scholars usually support a “clash of civilizations”² model of Islamic conquests in the Near East, Christians were not immediately threatened by Islam. Because of the region’s long history of shifting political dominance, Roman, then Persian, Christians had become accustomed to such changes in the composition of

the region’s political elite. As the Islamic control solidified however, Penn argues that Syriac Christian writers became more apocalyptic in their interpretation of what the rise of Islam portended. They did so because at first they were unsure whether Islam constituted a form of Christianity, or, as they finally concluded, presented a comprehensive form of political, social, and religious empire.

The fundamental purpose of this thesis is to answer the question of when and how Syrian Christians established a self-identity. After the death of Jesus of Nazareth, both Jews and early Christians living in Syria and Persia had developed their own understanding of their faith. Their identity had emerged from a shared but vaguely articulated belief in one God. However, over time and through a series of interactions with outsiders, the Jewish roots that were planted in Syria and Persia became a version of Christianity different from the one being practiced in the Roman Empire.

This thesis focuses on the exploration of the crafting of self-identity by Eastern Christians, targeting the sixth and seventh century solidification of a unique Church structure. To do this, the earlier, remote history of the disparate groups in the East that finally became the ‘Church of the East’ must be briefly identified in order to establish the organic origins of monotheism in the ancient Middle East. Recently, historians such as Michael Philip Penn and Philip Jenkins have introduced new theories on how this version of Christianity developed on its own, questioning traditional theories that once identified the Church of the East as having imported its radical dyophysite Christology from the exiled Roman bishop Nestorius. The newer scholarship, by contrast, allows us to examine issues of origin and proving the development of a Church of the East identity that had been shaped by alternating patterns of persecution and
toleration under the Sassanid Persians that in the end, proved capable of withstanding the Islamic conquests of the seventh century.

The differences in Christian groups examined in this thesis are marked by the respective understandings of a few fundamental interpretations of Scripture. In the Christian Gospel, Jesus asked his followers, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29/Matthew 16). Based on their answers to this theological question, Christian groups divided over time. The distinction between these groups, one of which eventually became the Syrian Christians, make clear the difference between Syrian and Roman Christians. The Roman understanding of Jesus of Nazareth will be referred to as ‘Chalcedonian Christianity,’ derived from a series of councils culminating with the Council at Chalcedon where the patriarchs of the Roman Empire solidified their theological understanding. ‘Eastern’ Christians is the term coined for those people who proclaimed a different answer to this key question. This thesis provides an historical basis for the emergence of the Church of the East that developed parallel to the Roman interpretation. In that process, we account for when and why Eastern Christians became separate from the Roman version of Christianity.

This thesis argues that Eastern Christians developed their identity through a series of encounters with Judaism, Chalcedonian Christianity, and Islam. The chapters are organized chronologically, according to the major influencing forces on Eastern Christianity. The first chapter examines the geographical region where the Church of the East is rooted. This includes the history of the Elkasites, a Jewish group that was settled in this area. Out of the Elkasite community, the Jewish traditions and beliefs can be traced to the Christology of East Syrian Christianity. This historical context is extremely important to the argument that East Syrian...
Christianity developed organically. Because of this unique history, Christians in Syria and Persia developed a self-identity rooted outside of the Chalcedonian, Roman identity.

The second chapter examines the shaping effect upon eastern Christianity of two centuries of warfare between the Sassanid Persian Empire and the Byzantine Roman Empire. Here, we must note that the complete destruction of Sassanid Empire sources make it impossible to rely upon contemporary Persian assessments of the Eastern Christians. Neither do we have access to determinative documentary sources for the Christian communities of that era. The Roman Empire’s strong Chalcedonian Church hierarchy eventually identified any group that did not uphold a Chalcedonian understanding of theology to be heretical. Therefore, what Romans inferred from interactions with these people is important to the development of the Syrian self-identity. The aim of this chapter is, in part, to demonstrate that the self-identity of the Church of the East was not a response to Nestorius’s condemnation, but a reaction to the political pressures forcing one version of Eastern Christianity to win out in Persia. The thesis explains the environment of political turmoil out of which the Church of the East grew, preparing it for the challenging Islamic conquests.

The third chapter examines the introduction of Islam into the region in the sixth century. The period of Islamic conquest of Syria and Persia spawned a series of Syriac writers who responded to the political unrest. This is where the body of primary sources, rediscovered by Penn and his colleagues, is heavily mined. In this chapter, we can begin to see from contemporary sources how the Syrian Christians’ self-identity was put to the test. This chapter argues that the responses recorded by Syriac writers prove their security was not immediately threatened by their Islamic conquerors as long as the change of regime remained principally that of a new elite having come into power. This quickly changed, and records from Eastern
Christians began to portray apocalyptic explanations of Islam’s increasingly systematic takeover of all aspects of daily life. According to Penn, in his introduction to the collection of Syriac sources, “As their conqueror’s religion was becoming both more assertive and less exclusively tied to ethnicity, Syriac Christians more frequently distinguished themselves from their conquerors through the categories of religion and religious difference.” Eventually, the political situation of the Abbasid Empire stabilized, and Eastern Christians were able to defend their ability to coexist within an empire that championed another faith.

In the conclusion, this thesis summarizes these findings and points to their implications for the spread of Christianity into regions of Asia. Those beliefs that made the Church of the East distinct also made them capable of introducing their understanding of Christianity into various Asian societies. It was the crucial developments of the fifth through seventh centuries that allowed the Patriarch of Baghdad, a century later, to answer questions about Eastern Christian theology in the way he did. Because of the important steps made over the sixth and seventh centuries by Syriac writers, the Church of the East had constructed and could now defend a cohesive identity.

This thesis argues that because there were roots of Judaism in Syria and Persian lands dating back centuries before Jesus’ life, Christianity was a logical addition to an environment already tending toward monotheism. As Christianity spread into the Roman Empire, it had been advanced by several emperors whose interest in religious stability enabled theological definitions to be created within Byzantium. Christendom was nonetheless severely splintered by these definitions, resulting in variants of Christology that became regionally accepted. This splintering

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was then exacerbated by two centuries of war between Sassanid Persia and Rome, each of which used persecution to force theologians to define Eastern Christianity in order to differentiate themselves from the Roman Christians – Persia’s enemy. This culminated in an institutionalized and articulate Church of the East, completely separate from Roman Chalcedonian Christianity, based in the Persian capitol of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and by the eighth century, in the nearby, newly-founded Islamic Caliphate capital of Baghdad. The Church of the East was tested in the seventh century with the Islamic conquests of their homeland, but the ability to define themselves and defend their theological differences allowed for the survival of the Church of the East.
The history of the Church of the East reflects deep roots in ancient pagan cults and Jewish diaspora groups that settled in the lands to the east of the Roman Empire. This history informs the climate in which this Eastern version of Christianity would take shape over the first six centuries of the common era. Beginning an analysis of how Christians in Syria and Persia had already identified themselves at the point of Islamic conquest in the seventh century requires acquiring an appreciation for the earlier religious environment into which Christian missionaries brought the Gospel.

An essential element of understanding the world in which Syrian Christians developed their self-identity lies in an appreciation of the cultic religious history of the region. This initial preparation is critical in order to demonstrate that there already existed monotheistic tendencies and traditions within the area that would allow for Judaism and Christianity to establish a footprint in the region. Also, recognition of the existence of the Jewish centers of the East is very important. Their history reflected the impact of several diaspora communities that had resettled in the lands of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Persia after the destruction of Israel in 70 CE. These Jewish diaspora groups created a setting that proved to be of great advantage to those who first preached Christianity as the culmination and vindication of the religion of ancient Israel. Precisely because of the influence exercised both by tendencies toward monotheism in general and especially of diasporic Judaism, some elements within the population of Syria had practiced one or another form of monotheistic religion, or were at least familiar with this notion of a deity.
which would have made Christianity appear less alien, and this potentially appealing, to them. Furthermore, the evidence that some diaspora groups, such as the Elkesaite form of Judaism, incorporated Christian elements into their theology, demonstrated that the common belief that what would eventually emerge as the Church of the East’s understanding of Christianity received is Christological character much earlier than the events in the Roman Empire when the bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, was exiled in 435 CE. In short, the Church of the East emerged with an identity that cannot accurately be called “Nestorian.”

This chapter first explains the existence and development of a unified faith that was present in both the Roman Empire and in Syria itself before Nestorius’s lifetime. This Christian theology was understood in the scattered Syrian Christian groups, but they did not write about it as the Romans did. Christianity in Syria remained a decentralized phenomenon in the first few centuries CE. The bulk of the theological writings analyzed in this chapter out of necessity has to be taken from the Roman Empire because by comparison very few sources survive from the earliest days of Syrian Christianity. However, Syrian writers specifically addressed the doctrinal issues discussed in Rome. For this reason, the analysis of detailed theological doctrines from the Roman Empire can therefore be applied to Syrian Christians in the turbulent fourth century, but before the confrontation within the Empire that would lead to Nestorius’ condemnation and exile.

**Cultic Origins, the Jewish Diaspora, and the Evangelization of Edessa**

Little evidence survives about the exact content of the many cults that were present in Mesopotamia and Syria before the Common Era. J. B. Segal argues, however, that, “it is
sufficient to observe that the general atmosphere over a large area of northern Mesopotamia and Syria during the first centuries of the Christian era favored the conception of a single godhead.”

Pagan cults most commonly worshipped one god above all others, such as the sun god Bel or the Mother Goddess Atargatis, two of the most popular deities. The presence of at least some tendencies toward monotheism in this region provides a plausible background for understanding why exiled Jewish communities found a receptive home in the area. Segal continues his argument saying, “the motif of a divine trinity was familiar in this region of the ancient East, and the hope in life after death was … widespread at Edessa.” In many of the pagan cults, a trinity of planetary deities was central to worship, often including the figures of Zeus and Apollo alongside Atargatis. Water also played a crucial role in the worship of pagan gods in Mesopotamia and Syria. The imagery of fish as gods in lakes of water was common, and traditional ceremonies incorporated wells and springs into which devotees of the cult threw their offerings.

The particular form of Judaism that found a home in the towns of the Persian Empire would have encountered these pagan rites and forms of monotheism, and thus would have had to confront what Jews shared in common with their pagan neighbors compared to what remained distinctly Jewish. The writings of ancient Israel record the community’s exile in Egypt before their resettlement in Israel in roughly the 1400’s BCE. The Jewish community then experienced

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5 Segal, p. 61.
6 Segal, p. 46.
7 Segal, p. 48.
a centuries-long pattern of political destruction and subversion of its people at the hands of the Romans, Babylonians, and Persians.

In the 6th century BCE, the last remnants of the original Davidic-Solomonic kingship were destroyed and the Jews entered into the Babylonian period of exile in 587 BCE. For political reasons, the Jewish nobles were sent by the Babylonians into Mesopotamia, where some of them stayed for centuries and planted seeds of monotheism in the region. When the Persian Empire then overthrew the Babylonians the Jewish exiles were granted the right to return, by the Edict of Cyrus, in 539 BCE. Persian king Cyrus the Great (d. 530 BCE) allowed for the Jewish exiles to reestablish a community in Palestine and continue their faith. Neil Faulkner argues in his book *Apocalypse: The Great Jewish Revolt Against Rome* that the Jews returning from exile brought with them a “steel-hard” monotheism. By this, he meant that the political turmoil which the community had experienced during their frequent defeat as a nation had hardened their view of the world. He states, “their Yahwism hardened into an intolerant and inflexible monotheism.” This monotheistic Judaism had been protected by the Persian Empire, allowing it to grow. Despite the rebuilding of a second temple in Jerusalem, the largest numbers of the returning exiles settled beyond the borders of ancient Israel and Judaea. The various diasporic forms of Judaism created famous centers, the most populous and influential being Alexandria in Ptolemaic Egypt.

A few centuries later, the Maccabaean Revolt, lasting from 167 to 142 BCE, was provoked when the King Antiochus Epiphanes IV attempted to ban Judaism in the state. The reaction to his political threats took the form of a Jewish uprising against the Seleucids, led by

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9 Faulkner, p. 69.
the priest Maccabaeus. He launched an attack that eventually led to one of the few victories of the Jews against their foreign overlords, as well as the creation of a Jewish autonomous state.\textsuperscript{10} The state was ruled by the Hasmoneans, who established themselves as both high priests of the Jewish temple and as worldly kings of the political state.\textsuperscript{11} Faulkner writes that Jews in Israel remembered the Maccabaean Revolt as “one of the most important events in their history” two hundred years later, when the Romans once again took power back from the Jews.

Due to the autonomy the Jewish community experienced under the Hasmoneans for about a century, they reacted negatively when the Romans reinstated their power over Judaea, Israel, and Syria. In Jerusalem, the Jewish community resisted the Romans with yet another revolt. However, Peter Richardson states that, “Hasmonean inability to solve their dynastic, civil, and religious affairs led inevitably to the extension of Rome’s power in the area.”\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, in 40 BCE Herod the Great (d. 4 BCE) became king in this tumultuous environment. He survived the attempts by the elites of Jerusalem to remove him, and even married a Hasmonean princess.\textsuperscript{13} Herod made several significant attempts to create peace between the Jewish community and the Roman rulers. Some of these included additions to the Second Temple in Jerusalem and construction projects in cities with sizable Diaspora communities.\textsuperscript{14} Richardson argues that “some of the great cities of the east flowered in the conditions following the struggle for empire: Antioch, Laodicea, Beruit, Tyre, Damascus … [and] in this flowering, Herod was a significant

\textsuperscript{10} Faulkner, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{12} Richardson, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{13} Richardson, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{14} Richardson, p. 31.
Because of his position, Herod’s reign created prosperity and security for the Jews of the Diaspora.  

It is also notable that during Herod’s reign, Richardson argues that the lands of Israel, Judaea, and Syria all functioned as roughly one geopolitical unit. This is significant to the argument of this thesis – that a version of Syrian monotheism had already begun to form its own identity. From this we can see that the political changes, following a series of exiles, autonomous rule, and Roman conquest, eventually established a version of Jewish monotheism at the end of the last century BCE which was strong, self aware, and committed to its own survival.

Beyond the details of the movement of these groups, relatively little is known about the versions of Judaism that existed before the final Roman Exile. However, the Hasmonean period engendered some centralization of Judaism in the east. Faulkner writes that, “by AD 66, repeatedly recharged by upsurges of nationalist struggle against Greeks, Hellenising kings and Roman governors, the cult of the Pharisees was at full vigour.” The Pharisees were a class of experts in the strict observance of the law who taught this rigorous form of Judaism, and that rigorous and self-conscious identity now informed the mainstream of popular Judaism. From this sprung the nationalism that led to the Jewish revolts again in 66 CE in Judaea. Finally, after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem with its Temple in 70 CE, renewed exile created yet another form of Judaism that spread further east beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire by around the year 100 CE.

15 Richardson, p. 83.
16 Richardson, p. 265.
17 Richardson, p. 81.
18 Faulkner, p. 72.
19 Faulkner, p. 72.
One particular form of a Jewish diaspora group that played a critical role in the later development of Church of the East Christianity is known as the Elkesaites located at Edessa. In this group, one can see the earliest elements of Christianity and Judaism being merged with the pagan cults present in Syria and Mesopotamia addresses earlier. Segal explains that the Elkesaites believed in “the acknowledgement of a single god, the rejection of earlier prophets, the veneration of water as a source of life, belief in the male and female principle of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and belief in reincarnation.”

Apart from these newly arrived diaspora groups, Judaism had already established a presence in some of the most populated cities in the East because of frequent trade throughout the Mediterranean and Near East. Nisibis, Edessa, and Adiabene were all closely connected by trade routes such as the Silk Road. In each of these cities, Jewish diaspora groups had already taken refuge in each of these cities during earlier times of persecution. Edessa was linked to Jerusalem and Antioch, remaining a route for pilgrims and armies into the East.

As a result of the re-settlement of a particular strain of Judaism from Palestine into Syria, it comes as no surprise, that as one scholar has observed, “in north Mesopotamia Christian evangelists found in the Jewish communities tools ready at hand for the diffusion of their faith; for they were close-knit congregations, respected by their neighbors, willing to accept the Christians as allies against the dominant paganism, well acquainted with the methods of analysis and argument best suited to the theological climate of the country, and well acquainted too with the doctrines of the Old Testament.”

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20 Segal, p. 44.
21 Jenkins, p. 45.
22 Segal, p. 41.
23 Segal, p. 46.
24 Segal, p. 42.
As a result of the spread of Christian missionary activities within these Jewish communities over the course of two centuries, the first Christian kingdom emerged as Osrhoene, with its capitol at Edessa. The king of Osrhoene accepted Christianity as the official religion around 200 CE, following a long history of devotion to Judaism.\textsuperscript{25} This is important because in ancient times, Edessa was considered one of the most impressive centers for learning. This tradition of scholarship translated into Christian theology and Edessa became a strong center of Christian learning. Segal maintains that the Bible was even first translated to Syriac at Edessa.\textsuperscript{26}

Focusing specifically on Edessa, we can roughly highlight the way in which Christianity took root in the East. Edessa is an obvious choice for such an analysis because of its size as a large city populated with scholars and a learning center of the East. More evidence survives from this center than we have for other areas of the region although these are still limited and restricted to literary works. Segal provides accounts of several of the legends recorded about the introduction of Christianity.

One of these, the \textit{Doctrine of Addai}, is a lengthy epic that in all likelihood represents at least two centuries worth of history compressed into a story about a mere two generations. For this reason, Segal makes the point that the purpose of this particular legend was to represent local traditions while still having a foundation in factual history.\textsuperscript{27} In this epic, the central figure, a preacher named Addai speaks to the King of the region, Agbar. Addai is depicted as one of the disciples of Jesus Christ. According to Segal’s translation of the epic, Addai taught the principles of Christianity against pagan traditions common in Edessa until “even Jews conversant with the

\textsuperscript{25} Jenkins, p. 54.
\textsuperscript{26} Segal, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{27} Segal, p. 78.
Law and the Prophet … too were persuaded and made the Christina confession.” The story also makes clear that although Addai was successful in achieving conversions, the pagan altars and priests were allowed to remain in the kingdom and shared equal rights with both Christians and Jews. It is likely that this account was written retrospectively during the third century CE. Nevertheless, the similarities of certain details within the story can be linked to the actual, historically documented events of the kingship of Agbar, and allusions are made to other historical figures. The Doctrine of Addai is representative of the method of evangelization in Edessa and throughout the East. While Christianity was spreading, Judaism and paganism remained popular. The entire region appears to have been characterized by a kind of tolerance of various forms of monotheism.

When epics such as this were written, the Roman Empire had access to the information. One of the most well known Roman historians, Eusebius (d. 340 CE), included accounts of the same events as The Doctrine of Addai. This meant that the Romans had no reason to believe that the Christianity practiced in the East differed in any significant way from their own. Between the councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Ephesus (431 CE) held within the boundaries of the Roman Empire, the reputation of the Church of the East in the eyes of the Romans reflected their own beliefs and practices. This again shows the unity between Nicaean and Eastern Christianity before the Nestorian Controversy. This unity helped to establish an identity in the East which was acknowledged and appreciated by theologians and church leaders in the Roman Empire. This is important considering the dialogue between men in Edessa and in Rome concerning theological controversies that began to take shape in the course of the fifth century.

Figure 1. Map of Major Christian Cities in Middle East
Nicene Theology

Keeping in mind this summary account of the monotheistic tendencies of the Jewish and pagan groups in the Syrian context, one is able to move to a consideration of how it became possible for a version of Christianity to emerge in the regions East of the Roman Empire that eventually would come into conflict with its western neighbors. But it is equally important to understand the contemporary formation of a Christian identity within the Roman Empire itself. Although this is not the geographical area with which this thesis is concerned, it will be necessary to make comparisons between the first tolerated, then officially sanctioned Roman imperial form of Christianity and the Church of the East. Secondly, the Roman Empire was the most powerful body in the ancient world. Therefore, any interaction the Eastern Christians had with their Roman neighbors had political consequences. These consequences manifested themselves in the Christians’ relationships with their own secular rulers, and perhaps even more importantly, in their developing sense of their own identity. Finally, Eastern Christians shared during he first four centuries of Christian history what we commonly think of as Roman Nicaean theology. Because of this, and because the Roman sources on Christian theology are greater in number and more accessible, an explanation of the formation of the Nicaean understanding of Christianity is vital to understanding the simultaneous development of Eastern Christianity. As Philip Jenkins explains, “once we remove the symbolic constraint of the borders, we get a better sense of the opportunities available to early Christians. The Mediterranean world had its very familiar routes, but so did the lands east and northeast of Jerusalem, through Syria, Mesopotamia, and beyond.”30 The earliest Nicaean Christian tradition was spread East through

30 Jenkins, p. 50.
ancient trade and travelling routes. As Jenkins observes, “these borders, which changed dramatically over time, placed few real limits on trade, whether in goods or ideas.”

Christianity’s introduction to the Roman Empire had engendered periodic, and then eventually widespread, persecution. Popular opinion within the Roman Empire, at times exploited by particular emperors for political purposes, was that the adherents of this new religion posed a threat to the stability of Roman paganism. According to Aziz S. Atiya, for Romans at this time, “a Christian was a conspiring rebel against time-honoured polytheistic tradition and against the established divinity of the imperial dignity.” In the Roman Empire, the persecution of Christians continued until the Emperor Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 CE, granting religious toleration to this new religion within the empire. In terms of alliances, the acceptance of Christianity in the Roman Empire created a problem for their most threatening enemy – the Sassanid Persian Empire in the east. Because the Church of the East had already established a significant presence in the lands between the two powers, this meant, at least in the minds of fearful Sassanid rulers that Eastern Christians would be more likely to side with, or receive support from, their Roman counterparts rather than with non-Christian Persians. For the Persians, this also meant that any Christian community therefore possessed a potential political threat, as Christianity grew in popularity in the Roman Empire.

Constantine the Great’s reign changed the course of history for Christianity because of his role in demanding that Christians present a unified theology behind which the Roman Empire could stand. This meant that Christianity at least in theory could become a powerful religion

31 Jenkins, p. 50.
33 Atiya, p. 28.
34 Atiya, p. 32.
identifiable by its enumerated theological teachings. For the Christians within the borders of the Roman Empire, the first even ecumenical council – i.e. including what was then regarded as the *pecumene* – the inhabited world – was called by the Emperor and held at Nicaea in 325 CE. Constantine’s intent focused on resolving internal disagreements within Christianity in the Empire. Events proved, however, that the Emperor’s hopes for a unified Christianity within his Empire were not to be easily realized. Only eventually, then, can one agree with Atiya’s judgment that “the Nicaean deliberations gave Christianity a Creed which has survived to this day.”

The theological decision made at Nicaea in 325 CE is the first real doctrinal issue that Syrian Christians contemporaneously addressed. This is significant for two reasons. First, the writers in Edessa who commented on the council of Nicaea agreed with the decisions that were made. This provides some of the first evidence for what Christians in Syria actually believed. Secondly, because writers such as St. Ephraim the Syrian (d. 373 CE) were writing about complex theological arguments, this shows that the community of Christians in the East was educated in theology at a level comparable to their contemporaries writing within the Roman Empire.

The Council at Nicaea was organized by Emperor Constantine as an opportunity for the heads of major Christian cities “to settle all outstanding dogmatic and doctrinal differences.” The question that provoked the need of an empire-wide Council concerned Christianity’s understanding of the relationship of Jesus to the God identified as “father” among Christians. This “father” was held to be identical with the God of ancient Israel. Specifically, the leaders of

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35 Atiya, p. 44.
36 Atiya, p. 44.
the church debated the relationship of The Father to The Son. Arius and Athanasius represented each side of the argument. Arius (d. 336 CE), a priest of Alexandria, believed that the Son was a created god. This was problematic for Arius’ bishop Alexander, and his deacon Athanasius because the idea that there was a time when Christ’s divinity was not eternal could not be reconciled with what these theologians insisted upon – namely, that Jesus was fully God.

Athanasius (d. 373 CE) argued that Christ was “God by nature,” rather than by human creation.\(^{37}\)

The result of the debate was the first version of the Nicene Creed, which reads, “We believe … in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God. Begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.”\(^{38}\) This excerpt from the creed contains the wording that remained controversial and significant enough to be debated for the next century and beyond. The words “of one substance” are a translation of the Greek term *homoousios*. The word in Greek literally means “same-essence.” This word was chosen specifically to affirm the divinity of Christ against the assertion that he was not fully divine, but was a created god. The fact that it nowhere appears in the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Scriptures caused considerable concern, but not enough to prevent its adoption by the council.

The result of this decision was endorsed not only by those within the Empire who became identified as “Nicaeans” but also by the Christians worshipping to the East of the Roman borders because the majority already accepted the teaching that Jesus was none other than the “eternally begotten” Son of the Father. This belief can be seen in the writings of one of the most celebrated


figures in the history of the Eastern Church, St. Ephraim (d. 373 CE) to the church leaders in
Edessa.\(^{39}\)

One of the most helpful books on Ephraim, *The Luminous Eye* by Sebastian Brock, explains the course of his life and his interactions with the Roman Empire which helped to form his ideology. Born to Christian parents, Ephraim lived in Nisibis in Northern Syria in roughly 306 CE.\(^{40}\) He was a deacon serving in this outpost of the Roman Empire, until the Persians took the city. After this, Ephraim went to Edessa where he continued to grow in recognition within the Church of the East. Brock argues that it was in Edessa that Ephraim began to encounter and take an active role in the theological disputes that were plaguing Christendom in the fourth century CE.\(^{41}\)

Ephraim lived during the theological turmoil addressed at the council at Nicaea, and just as was done in the Roman Empire, he combatted the view that the essence of the Son was different from that of the Father. He wrote in Syriac about his support for the unified version of the Trinity against the groups in Edessa that he believed, like Athanasius, threatened the monotheism of Christianity.\(^{42}\) Segal writes that in fact, Ephraim had an influence that “extended not only throughout Mesopotamia and Syria, but throughout the whole of Christendom.”\(^{43}\)

\(^{39}\) Segal, p. 87.


\(^{41}\) Brock, p. 17.

\(^{42}\) Segal, p. 90.

\(^{43}\) Segal, p. 89.
Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria

Despite the importance and fame of Ephraim to his contemporaries, the conflict between Nestorius (d. 451 CE) and Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444 CE) over Christology that began to take shape in the following century disrupted the unity between the Church of the East and Nicene Christianity to be overshadowed and largely forgotten. Nestorius, the theologian and bishop first at Antioch and then of the imperial capital city Constantinople, has been seen as a figurehead for the identity of the Church of the East’s theology instead of Ephraim. However, in recent years, scholars have shifted their opinions about the identity of the Church of the East away from Nestorius and instead focused on examining deeply rooted monotheistic traditions that welcomed Christianity in Syria predating the conflict that erupted in 431 CE. These include the pagan rituals, Jewish settlements, and Christian theology already noted that prove that an identity already existed for the Church of the East in the first three centuries CE. This section of this chapter, however, out of necessity has to examine the problems with the older accounts that link Roman Imperial Christianity’s dispute with Nestorius to the historical account of the development of the Church of the East.

Prior to calling an ecumenical council in 431 CE in Ephesus, the emperor Theodosius was encouraged by bishop Cyril of Alexandria to resolve issues that stemmed from the decisions made at Nicaea over a century before. Cyril wrote extensively to all the influential people in Egypt and the Roman Empire warning them of the threat of a heretical group led by Nestorius. Out of concern for the unity of the Roman Christian Church, the Emperor Theodosius called the council to settle another theological dispute.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{44} Wessel, p. 99.
The focus of the discussions centered upon a deeper understanding of the decisions made at Nicaea in 325 CE. Referred to as Christology, the topic of the dispute centered upon the proper understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ. On one side of the debate was Cyril, who had created a strong backing of support through his treatises. He argued that Christ should be understood as a same-natured being, (miaphysis) fully both human and divine in essence. He explained, “the mind perceives a difference between two natures, for the deity and the humanity are certainly not the same, although they subsist in a single reality.”  

This meant that the decision made by the council at Nicaea that Christ was of the same essence of God, was upheld with the acceptance of one word: theotokos. Cyril used the world theotokos – i.e. “God-bearer” – to describe Mary, and in doing so confirmed and strengthened the decisions at Nicaea. Wessel explains that, “for Cyril, the title theotokos for Mary was to confirm in one significant world all the Trinitarian concerns debated at Nicaea: if Jesus is God, then Mary was and must be designated as the ‘Mother of God’, Theotokos.”

Conversely, Nestorius represented the opposing side of the Christological debate. Wessel postulates that, “he is unwilling to designate Mary theotokos because that implied that the deity, rather than the humanity, had been conceived in her womb.” The implication for Nestorius was that Jesus had a dual-nature, (diaphysis) one being human and one being divine, and that only the human aspect had been conceived through Mary. In fact, however, Cyril attacked Nestorius’ sermons by quoting him incorrectly. Whereas Nestorius believed that the divine nature of Christ

45 Wessel, p. 97.
47 Wessel, p. 112.
48 Wessel, p. 105.
was united with God after the physical birth, Cyril reported to Leo I (d. 461 CE), Pope of Rome, that Nestorius denied Christ’s divinity altogether.\(^{49}\) For these reasons, the council of Ephesus decided in favor of Cyril and excommunicated and banished Nestorius to an internal exile in an Egyptian monastery as a heretic.

Only twenty years later, another meeting was held called the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. The result of this Council would be to accept in principle Cyril’s emphasis upon the divinity of Christ – but at the same time accepting a modified version of the “two-nature” terminology favored by the Antiochians that Nestorius has somewhat carelessly expressed in his sermons. What emerged at Chalcedon was the Christological doctrine saying that the correct understanding was that Jesus was of two natures, fully human and fully divine. The two natures communicated perfectly with one another, were separate, and nonetheless Christ was one person, possessed of two natures. This council caused major disagreements throughout Christendom, and thus failed in its objective at unifying the Christological teachings of all Christians. It is important to note the similarities – as well as the dissimilarities – between the Nestorian understanding of Christ and the Chalcedonian decision.

In John McGuckin’s book, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: A Christological Controversy*, the difference between Cyril’s and the Chalcedonian Christology is closely examined. McGuckin looks at the translations of terminology used for each side of the argument, such as *mia physis* or *dyo physis*. He argues that the context of Cyril’s use of *mia physis* to represent the “one enfleshed nature of God” was extremely close if not compatible with the decision made at Chalcedon.\(^{50}\) For McGuckin, the issues that divided the two sides were more based in political

\(^{49}\) Wessel, p. 105.
positions and personal grudges than on the theological difference in Christology. McGuckin writes, “in many respects Cyril’s immediate aversion to Nestorius’ Christology stems from the way he recognized it as an attack on his own Alexandrine tradition.” Furthermore, McGuckin explains his modern colleagues’ opinion that Cyril was “missing the point” by not listening to detailed explanations of his opponents’ arguments. In fact, had Cyril not been so focused on the primacy of the Alexandrian school of thought, an agreement could have been reached. McGuckin even says that Cyril ignored the similarities he shared with Syrian theologians because he thought they held less ‘weight’ than other voices.

These two bodies of Christological thought were also represented in Edessa at this time; in fact Segal writes that, “the whole body of Christendom was divided by the arguments over the natures of Jesus.” In Edessa, as elsewhere within and beyond the Roman Empire, the groups were referred to as Miaphysites (‘one-nature’) and Dyophysites (‘two-nature’). The term “monophysite” – “only nature” – was hurled at the Miaphysites by their Chalcedonian opponents. But this term was consistently rejected by the Church as a misrepresentation of what Eastern Christians believed in. The Church of the East thought monophysitism seemed to created two persons of Christ, which did not align with their own dyophysite theology. In the early 5th century CE, the number of Christians continued to multiply in Edessa. Segal points out that at the time the council was meeting in Ephesus, the number of Miaphysites and Dyophysites in Edessa was equally balanced. In fact, the debates over the person and natures of Christ created such strife between the leaders of Eastern Christian churches that violence occasionally broke

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51 McGuckin, p. 36.
52 McGuckin, p. 36.
53 Segal, p. 92.
54 Segal, p. 91.
55 Segal, p. 93.
out.\textsuperscript{56} Whereas the Roman Church was able to establish its self-identity and quell some of these disturbances through ecumenical councils and the power of the emperor, the decentralized Eastern Christian churches were unable to present a unified front against disagreements over doctrine and to resolve charges that one or the other position represented heresy, although that state of affairs would soon change.

It is also important to take into account that the persecution of Christians had begun and continued intermittently in Persian lands for over a century after the persecution of Christianity was ended by Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 CE within the Roman Empire. This not surprisingly had created a problem for the decentralized Church of the East. From roughly 224 to 651 CE, the Sasanian Dynasty ruled the people of Mesopotamia and the Near East with the belief that Zoroastrianism was the correct faith for the empire. To many Persian kings, Christianity was closely linked to their biggest enemy, the Roman Empire. This was exacerbated by the battles with Rome over Syria, heightening disdain for Christianity.\textsuperscript{57} Furthermore, kingship in Persia was believed to be a divine right, as was the case with Shapur II (r. 309 – 379 CE), which was something that was not supported by Christian theology.\textsuperscript{58} For these reasons, Christianity suffered intermittent persecution and structurally remained unable to organize itself as its counterparts did in the Roman Empire. However, Christianity did continue to grow within the Persian Empire despite the political conflicts. The Mesopotamian city of Ctesiphon became a center for Eastern Christians, despite sporadic conflict with Persian kings. Out of the cities across the lands of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia, the Church of the East would eventually be able to

\textsuperscript{56} Segal, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{58} Yarshater, p. 136.
organize itself around a central identity in the sixth century because of the already existing Christian communities that had planted their roots in the fourth century.

In conclusion, the notion that the dual-nature of Christ was exported from the Roman Empire and introduced to the East because of the Nestorian controversy is simply incorrect. The discussion of the Christology disputes between Nestorius and Cyril, however, serves several purposes. First, the Roman sources available which directly state the theological wording of doctrinal issues exist and in those sources, references are made to the Nestorian controversy. We have no comparable sources emerging from Persia, Mesopotamia, and Syria at the same time, and this disparity in sources prevents an understanding of the divisive issues seen from the standpoint of those writing beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire. Secondly, the translations by J. B. Segal of Syriac writers show that the disputes over the divine and human natures of Jesus was a pre-existing issue, before Nestorius was ever exiled. This fact serves the dual purpose of further disproving the claim that imported Nestorianism created the identity of the Church of the East. More importantly, it also shows that Eastern Christian theologians were discussing these issues on their own. Christianity had developed as rapidly in the East as it had in the West, and boasted a theological center at Edessa that is comparable to Alexandria in the Empire.

Therefore, it appears beyond dispute that the roots of monotheism existed in Syria and Mesopotamia long before Christians even got there. From there, the Jewish diaspora and trade patterns created a solid ideological and social infrastructure that laid the foundation for Christianity. When the persecution of Christianity ended, doctrinal disputes began. We can see that the issues were common across Christendom and worldwide. However, Eastern Christians faced a problem that Roman Christians did not – they were decentralized across political entities.
Syrian and Mesopotamian lands were fought over by the Persian and Roman Empires, causing Sassanid kings to distrust the religious unity of Christians in the Church of the East and their Nicene counterparts. As exemplified in writings from Edessa, the hostility that was created by theological disagreements would call for a stronger Eastern Christian Church.
Chapter 2

Solidification Under Persian Influence

The Church of the East began to develop its identity in the early centuries of the common era, owing much of its successful unification to the imperial authority of the Persian Sassanids. The relationship that Eastern Christians developed with the Persian emperors enabled them to develop further their own identity outside of, and in part, against that of Christians within the Roman Empire. The purpose of this chapter is to reconstruct a picture of the relationship East Syrian Christians developed with their overlords in the two centuries before the Islamic conquest of Persia. This will help to provide an historical context that accounts for how East Syrians dealt with persecution, outlasted conquests, and fundamentally solidified their Church. As the Persian Empire expanded against the Romans, the Sassanid Dynasty’s political policy encouraged Eastern Christians to distinguish themselves ever more dramatically as a body of believers separate from Roman Chalcedonian Christian Orthodoxy. This political reality encouraged them to reflect even more intensely upon their own particular, distinctive doctrines and that process in turn led to a more systematic profession of their beliefs. Those developments, in turn, would become crucial when they encountered the new political overlords, the Islamic Arab conquerors of the Sassanids.

This chapter will examine the Sassanid Dynasty in Persia as it affected the development of the Church of the East. After enumerating the Sassanids’ tendencies toward political expansion and sporadic persecution of Christians within their borders, we must also explain the schism that developed between East and West Syrian Christians during the fifth and early sixth centuries. That division was itself the result of Sassanid political influence and forced Syrian Christians to become self-aware of the specific creed they would profess. The city of Edessa
during this time period provides a valuable example of the development of Christianity in the East and it will thus serve as a case study showing the geopolitical effects of the Roman-Persian conflicts in a theological center. Only by understanding the relationship of East Syrian Christians to the Sassanids can one then assess correctly the seventh century Syrian Christian writers’ reaction to the Islamic conquests.

Aidan Nichols argues that the Church of the East “was greatly assisted by the fact that the Church in Persia, under pressure from the Sassanid monarchy there, already showed a strong tendency to independence – particularly after the Roman Empire, the natural enemy of Sassanid Persia, became officially Christian.”\(^{59}\) Atiya supports this argument, suggesting that the Church of the East purposefully distinguished itself from East Roman Orthodoxy or, as they eventually came to be known, the Jacobites in order to appeal to the Persians. This caused the systematic solidification of the Church of the East under distinct doctrines that protected Eastern Christians by differentiating them from the Romans. Similarly, David Wilmshurst articulates the pattern of persecution, stating, “The Church of the East was tolerated by the Sasanian\(^{60}\) kings, though Christians were always suspect during periods of warfare with Rome, and the Church was subjected to devastating persecution during the reign of Shapur II (d. 379 CE) and to several less severe attacks from [his] successors.”\(^{61}\) This chapter will explore how the doctrinal disputes explained earlier then intersected with the political tension between the two major empires following the Council of Chalcedon.


\(^{60}\) Some scholars refer to the Sassanid Persians as ‘Sasanian,’ which is simply a different translation of the same dynastic name.

The Persian Sassanid Empire

The Persian Empire came to be reshaped by the Sassanid dynasty in the early third century when Ardashir I (d. 242 CE) rose to power in the wake of the destruction of the Parthian dynasty. The Sassanid dynasty would last from 224 CE until it was finally conquered during the Arab invasions and fell in 651 CE. The Sassanids are remembered for their expansion against the Roman Empire, as they posed the only serious threat to the dominant imperial powerhouse. It will be important to lay out the basic history of the Persian Empire between 451 and 632 CE to set the context for the formation of the Church of the East. David Wilmshurst argues that, “The Church of the East was essentially the Church of the western provinces of [Sassanid] Persia, where Christianity had gained a firm foothold by the end of the third century.”62 For the purpose of this thesis, this section will take note of the religious policies enacted by individual emperors, demonstrating that they were largely pursued in reaction to the ongoing conflict with the Roman Empire.

When Ardashir I came into power in 224 CE, his immediate foreign policy goal amounted to expanding into the Roman Empire through raids on the western border of Mesopotamia. Although unsuccessful at first, he set the tone for the next four centuries of back-and-forth land grabbing between the Byzantines and the Sassanids. According to Segal, “the new rulers of Persia followed a policy of national aggrandizement; eager to restore the empire of the Achaemenids, they conducted war against Rome with determination.”63

One hundred years later, the strong leader Shapur II (d. 379 CE) achieved both imperial and religious success. The new Persian dynasty committed itself to a more visible form of

62 Wilmshurst, p. xiv.
63 Segal, p. 110.
Zoroastrianism, the official religion of the empire. As Shapur II expanded against Rome’s Emperor Julian, he created religious policies to specifically help his political cause. During his reign, the “Avesta,” the compilation of sacred Zoroastrian texts, was completed. This strengthened his imperial religious identity because the Persian Empire’s relationship with Zoroastrianism solidified, enabling it to function as a theocracy. Harsh policies of persecution against Persia’s Christians followed the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, illustrating the imperial preference of Zoroastrianism at the cost of Christianity. This reaction to the growing favor Christianity enjoyed within the Roman Empire became a key part of Persian political planning, because it strengthened the Sassanids in the face of the imperial power to their west. Despite the close relationship in the east between Jewish and Christian history and theology, Shapur II persecuted Christians while Jews were left alone. 64 Segal argues that this provides some of the first evidence of the geopolitical effects for Christians living in the Persian Empire during the Sassanid-Byzantine conflict period. Since no appreciable difference between Roman and Eastern Christianity yet existed, Eastern Christians who upheld the same doctrines as the Romans appeared to the Sassanids to be identical, and therefore politically, potentially dangerous.

Conversely, a few decades after Shapur II, Yazdegerd I (d. 421 CE) made peace with the Romans for a few short years. Along with his peace treaty with Theodosius II (d. 450 CE) he made peace among the religions in his empire. Yazdegerd I ended the policy of persecuting Christians in Persia, and tried to spread religious tolerance, passing an edict of toleration in 409/410 CE. Bahram V (d. 438 CE) continued his policies with success. During the times of political maintenance, rather than expansion of the Sassanid Empire, Eastern Christianity was able to grow.

64 Segal, p. 111.
The problem for Christians, however, remained that of the sporadic pattern of tolerance followed by renewed persecution, which depended on the Persian-Roman imperial conflicts. Emperor Yazdegerd II (d. 457 CE), son of his religiously tolerant father, persecuted religious minorities as he renewed Persia’s fight against the Byzantines. During his reign, he was responsible for a major massacre of Christians in 448 CE.

The next man to make peace with the Romans, although briefly, was emperor Khosrau (d. 579 CE). During his reign he made an agreement with Justinian I (d. 565 CE), which only lasted a few years before he broke it repeatedly. Khosrau’s reign was marked by the political relationship with Justinian – both powerful expansionists who used religion as tools in their political goals. Peter Brown argues that during Khosrau’s reign, Persia gained the financial clout to truly threaten Justinian’s Byzantium. The result of this was an assimilation of cultures across a continuously fluctuating border between the two empires. Justinian’s conquests along the border left to the “common loyalty to the Roman emperors, a common piety, a common idiom in ornament, a common stable coinage.” Furthermore, the “overriding priority of the Near East in the policies of the east Roman state” meant that the Christianity of cities such as Antioch and Edessa was fully immersed by Byzantine Orthodoxy. This period of conflict between Khosrau and Justinian fostered tension between differentiating understandings of Christians – Miaphysite and Dyophysite that had arisen after Chalcedon and that no amount of effort on the part of the Roman emperors was able to resolve.

At the turn of the seventh century, Khosrau II (d. 628 CE) led an expansion effort that would trump anything previously accomplished in the Persian Empire. After a series of internal

66 Brown, p. 158.
67 Brown, p. 154.
squabbles over succession, Khosrau II came out on top and turned toward the western border of his empire. He fought against the Roman Emperor Heraclius (d. 641 CE) in a series of battles in which Persia gradually gained Edessa, Syria in 611 CE, Jerusalem in 614 CE, and finally Egypt in 619 CE.\(^{68}\) During his reign, Brown argues that Khosrau II “shrewdly addressed his propaganda to the Christian populations: he ascribed his successes to the protection of St. Sergius, the patron saint of the Syriac-speakers.”\(^{69}\) When Persian armies conquered Jerusalem, they took with them the relic of the Holy Cross. The East Christians understandably viewed this as a victory over the false teachings of their Western counterparts. This meant that the Persian-Roman conflict took on a deeper meaning to the Christians. In fact, Brown remarks, “Heraclius’ rise to power and his defeat of Persia took place in the atmosphere of a crusade.”\(^{70}\) Jerusalem was considered to be the center of the world by many Christians in the seventh century, and for that reason Heraclius focused his efforts on regaining the Holy Cross.

At the height of its expansion, the Sassanid Empire encompassed what today is Iran, Iraq, Eastern Arabia, Syria, Israel, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Central Asia, Yemen, and Pakistan. In such a vast empire, when Sassanid emperors were looking to expand, they reactively prevented the spread of a religion they believed tied their subjects too closely to their opponents. As such, Christianity was a tool frequently used by the Sassanids against the Romans. In the course of the fourth century, the Persians killed an estimated sixteen thousand Christians over a period of forty years.\(^{71}\) Early persecution was focused on the destruction of the Persians’ rival superpower, until the Persian version of Christianity was able to distinguish itself as separate from the theology of

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\(^{68}\) Brown, p. 169.  
\(^{69}\) Brown, p. 169.  
\(^{70}\) Brown, p. 172.  
\(^{71}\) Jenkins, p. 57.
the Roman Empire. Specifically, after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, only the versions of Syrian Christianity that aligned with the Byzantine understanding of orthodoxy were persecuted, whereas those the Roman Orthodox deemed heretical were able to flee to Persia for protection.\textsuperscript{72}

In fact, Nichols argues that “the Nestorians [East Syrians] were for the most part left in peace by the Persian monarchy . . . though there were occasional brief periods of persecution, sometimes severe.”\textsuperscript{73} Those sporadic outbreaks of persecution occurred because of the East-West Syrian Christian schism that occurred following the decision made at Chalcedon. The important takeaway from this brief history is that the unswerving policy of the Persian Empire under the Sassanid Dynasty was to destroy all ties to the Romans, in their determination to expand the western borders of their empire.

**East and West Syrian Christian Schism**

Following the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Eastern Church split between Miaphysite and Dyophysite traditions. The splitting of the Syrian episcopate, previously based in Antioch, stratified Christianity in the East according to political divisions between the Romans and the Persians. This split was exacerbated by the desire for each side of the Roman-Persian conflict to retain the territory of Syria and control the population of Christians. The political turmoil in this region, caused by expansion and persecution, caused two versions of Eastern Christianity to emerge. One would become the Jacobite Church, forming out of the Miaphysite Syrians in Antioch. The second, more populous and powerful group, would be named the Church

\textsuperscript{72} Jenkins, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{73} Nichols, p. 44.
of the East, developing out of the version of the Dyophysite tradition that had developed within the territory of the Sassanid Empire. Brown argues that within Persia, “Nestorian Christianity settled down as the only true oriental church. Excluded from the orthodox Roman Empire, the Nestorians struck up a delicate *modus vivendi* with the Persian governing class.” Seleucid-Ctesiphon, the capital twin cities of the Persian Empire, became a hub for both Miaphysites and Dyophysites seeking to distance themselves from the disputes inside the Roman Empire.

As the progression of battles back and forth between Rome and Persia played out, Antioch fell to the Roman side. The strength of Chalcedonian orthodoxy influenced many Syrian Christians to move out of the city and further east, to Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Atiya describes this process, noting that, as Syrians were “relentlessly pursued by the Greeks, they therefore found their haven of peace in Persia, the inveterate enemy of Byzantium.” The Persian kings did not like the fact that the Antiochene ecclesiastical see had demonstrated allegiance to the official religion of the Roman Empire laid down at Chalcedon. This created a problem for Syrian Christians.

In response to this issue, some leaders of Syrian Christianity decided to disassociate themselves entirely from the West. This happened rapidly in the fifth century as the bishops in Mesopotamia and Seleucia-Ctesiphon organized their church into dioceses. The Synod of Isaac, held in 410 CE, established the major metropolitan centers and their corresponding churches, creating a hierarchy that allowed growth and stability within Persia. Following these steps, Yazdegerd I ratified the Synod of Isaac, making the Church of the East a legitimate minority in the Persian Empire. Wilmshurst argues that following this, “Persia’s Christians were now no

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74 Brown, p. 164.
75 Jenkins, p. 57.
76 Atiya, p. 240.
longer a despised heretical sect, subject to arbitrary persecution whenever it suited the magi, but a recognized minority community.” 77 Several years later, Syrian Bishop Babowi (d. 484 CE) expanded this organization in Seleucid-Ctesiphon under the patriarch-episcopal model. 78. It was under Bishop Babowi that the Church of the East reached a crucial turning point in its formative period. Bishop Babowi, under the protection of the Persian kings, declared complete independence from the West by assuming the title of ‘Patriarch of the East.’ 79 Dyophysite leaders in the East assumed the position of official ecclesiastical authority, founding the Eastern Church in Persia. 80

The encouragement of this schism between Syrian Christians came directly from the Sassanid emperors. The patriarchal see was officially located in the Persian capital itself, Seleucia-Ctesiphon. 81 The remaining Miaphysites in the Persian Empire were massacred, and the Dyophysite tradition was ceremonially blessed within the imperial realm. 82 The Roman emperors referred to this Persian version of Dyophysite Christology as Nestorianism, because the version of Dyophysitism that had already developed by Eastern Christians resembled the heretical views, marked by political controversy, of Nestorius. 83 Furthermore, if the Persian emperors upheld this understanding, the natural response of their Roman enemies would be to condemn especially what they regarded as the wrong version of the Dyophysite understanding of Christology as heretical. The version of Dyophysitism adopted by Chalcedon certainly appeared too “miaphysite” in nature from the perspective of the strict dyophysite Christology of the Church of

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77 Wilmhurst, p. 20.
78 Nichols, p. 38.
79 Atiya, p. 253.
80 Segal, p. 116.
81 Nichols, p. 38.
82 Atiya, p. 252.
83 Wilmhurst, p. xiv.
the East. What from later perspective might have been a conflict over terminology – and the difficulties of translating Greek terms into equivalent Syriac – did not matter at the time. Wilmshurst argues that the utility of pitting Roman versus Persian Christology against each other exemplifies the political convictions held within the Roman Orthodox Catholic church when considering its Persian counterpart.

As the warfare between Rome and Persia continued, the Eastern Syrians continued to distinguish themselves as separate from the Westerners through language. They retained their own Syriac liturgies, rather than Greek traditionally used in the West. Conversely, Antioch continued its liturgical tradition in Greek although Syriac did not entirely disappear there. By the end of the fifth century, the Eastern Syrians had engendered a definitive separation and rising distinct identity from the Western Miaphysites.

The sixth century was thus a formative period for the newly distinguished Dyophysite Eastern Syrian, Christian Church. In Nisibis, the Eastern Church grew under the intellectual and spiritual leaders at the University of Nisibis, founded in 457 CE. The school was a driving force for the Dyophysite understanding of the nature of Jesus after the split from the western Syrians. Atiya argues that, “to this school, the Nestorian Church owed its real reformers.” Other influential men were also working in Seleucia-Ctesiphon under the patriarchate. One of these men was Babai the Great (d. 628 CE), who wrote the Book of Union, which became a key source of the Eastern Syrian’s theology. By the end of the sixth century, theologians specializing in

84 Jenkins, p. 57.
85 Historians writing about the Church of the East earlier than around 2000 still referred to them as ‘Nestorians,’ before the traditional understanding of the formation of the earliest Syrian Christians had been reevaluated to support organic growth of the Christian community in Syria before Nestorius.
86 Atiya, p. 254.
87 Nichols, p. 39.
promulgating Eastern Syrian doctrines had definitively articulated and given the final seal to their theology.88

The Western Syrians, without the protection of the Persian Empire, were housed in the cities along the border between the Roman and Persian lands. This group of Christians faced a unique problem, because they did not follow Roman Orthodoxy, but they were living in Roman-occupied territories. They were not allowed refuge in the Persian Empire, because they were Miaphysites, which the Sassanids thought to be too closely tied to the Byzantines. Furthermore, miaphysitism was condemned at Chalcedon, which meant they were a distinct group not aligned with Chalcedonian Orthodoxy. This group of central Asian Miaphysites was eventually organized under Jacobus Baradaeus (d. 578 CE) with the new title the ‘Jacobites’.89 This group, because of its unfortunate geopolitical situation, did not have the opportunity to grow and expand like the Eastern Syrian Christians did through missionary work.

The schism between the East and West Syrians provides a degree of insight into the impact that the Persian conflict with Rome had over the two hundred years between 451 and 632 CE. Because of the political ties that Miaphysites were assumed to have with the Byzantines, the Syrian Church’s identity split in two – one side remaining Miaphysite, and one side fully accepting the Dyophysite understanding, as it had been attributed – whether correctly or not – to Nestorius in the 430s. This distinction was unnoticed internally until it was exacerbated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. After that, the Syrians were forced to self-evaluate and take sides, while facing persecution in both Rome and Persia if they chose incorrectly.

88 Atiya, p. 254.
89 Jenkins, p. 58.
East and West Syrian Christian Schism

Throughout the East, major cities became the footholds of Eastern Syrian Christianity. The percentage of the Persian population that adhered to Christianity was already high within the Persian Empire, and spread further into the east through missionary work. By the early fourth century, the Church of the East organized the Persian territory into five metropolitan provinces. Brown remarks that, “Nestorian clergymen followed the Persian-dominated trade-routes as far apart as Fukien and Ceylon.” The areas along the border between the Roman and Persian empires were significantly effected by the conflict over territories between the two superpowers of the fifth and sixth centuries. One such city, Edessa, located near the modern day border of Turkey and Syria, provides a useful case study for the effects of the Persian-Roman conflicts on Christianity. Significant scholarly sources are available on the history of Edessa, making it ideal, along with its location, for this thesis. Other cities that will be mentioned include Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Merv, Nisibis, Antioch, and Tikrit.

Seleucia-Ctesiphon, capital of the Persian Sassanid Empire, initially doubled as the main seat for the Eastern Christian Church. The previous home of the Syrian Christians had been Antioch, until the relentless advances of the Byzantines pushed them out for fear of persecution. The natural stronghold then was the Persian capital, as the emperors wanted to take power away from their Roman enemies. As the struggle between east and west continued to play out within the Syrian Christians, the Persians sided with the Easterners and the Church of the East won out as the major version of Christianity within the Persian realm. The introduction of a Patriarch of

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90 Wilmshurst, p. 1.
91 Brown, p. 164.
the East in 498 CE, housed in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, is evidence of the city’s prominence within East Syrian Christianity.

Another significant metropolitan see of the Eastern Church was Merv, located on the eastern side of the Persian Empire. In 544 CE, the Church of the East maintained a great hub of Christian intellectual and spiritual life in this city. The School of Merv was established in order to translate works from Syriac into Central Asian languages, spreading the missionary work of the East Syrians even into Asia and China. This work was important to the development of the Church of the East, as Jenkins argues that, “Christians needed to maintain the highest intellectual standards because of the constant competition they faced from other faiths.” Because it was located away from the border territory between Rome and Persia, Merv enjoyed significantly more contact with Asian and other Near Eastern religions than cities such as Edessa. For this reason, Merv is a good example of how Eastern Christianity survived as a minority in a multifaith society, focusing on developing their Church through missions and scholarly theology.

A similar city to Merv, Nisibis became another hub of learning for Christian scholars. Located on the present day border of Turkey and Syria, Nisibis was a large city with thriving intellectual institutions. It was a metropolitan see with six lesser churches under its control. According to Wilmshurst, Nisibis was second in rank only to Seleucia-Ctesiphon among the major dioceses of the Church of the East because it had a large Christian population. When the University of Edessa, one of the first Eastern Christian schools, was shut down by the Romans, the teachers moved to Nisibis to continue their work. Jenkins argues that the Sassanid Persians

92 Jenkins, p. 45.
93 Jenkins, p. 46.
94 Wilmshurst, p. 19.
95 Jenkins, p. 61.
appreciated the School of Nisibis because “it became a refuge for dissident Christian scholars uncomfortable with Byzantine rule.” This city therefore exemplified the cautious, if inconsistent, endorsement of the particular version of Christianity by the Persian Empire for political reasons.

Antioch and Tikrit, two cities located in Mesopotamia, experienced the opposite effect of the Roman-Persian conflict. These cities were located on the border, directly experiencing the Byzantine-Persian land battles. In Antioch, the original Miaphysites were faced with Roman overlords who saw them as heretics following the Council of Chalcedon, and therefore distrusted them. These Asian Miaphysites were also unwelcome in Persia, because the Sassanids saw them as equivalent to the Chalcedonians. These “West” Syrians eventually organized under Jacobus Baradeus and remained rivals to Constantinople, despite their location within the Roman Empire. The Jacobites spread and founded several monasteries within Antioch and Tikrit, but faced severe political pressures on all sides.

In order to examine these political factors on a closer level, the city of Edessa serves as a useful case study. Segal argues that, “in these circumstances Edessa was a fortress of exceptional importance... Edessa’s natural strength and strategic situation assured its status as a provincial capital and military base.” Because of this, Edessa was uniquely targeted by both Persia and Rome for expansion. The city was the home of the earliest Syrian Christians in the third and fourth century, who originally upheld the doctrines of the ecclesiastical councils in Rome. However, the success of the denomination of Christianity in Edessa depended on who controlled it.

96 Jenkins, p. 77.
97 Jenkins, p. 62.
98 Segal, p. 115.
For geopolitical reasons, Edessa became part of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, and turned to Constantinople for support. The Christians in this city immediately faced challenges because they spoke and worshipped in Syriac rather than Latin or Greek, and had more cultural ties to the East rather than the West. They did not adhere to Roman Orthodoxy, as they were Miaphysites, and were therefore considered heretics by the empire.99

According to Segal, because official policy in Persia was originally antagonistic toward Christianity, when Constantine passed his Edict in 313 CE, “thenceforward, the duel between the empires of Byzantium and Persia became a contest between Christianity and Zoroastrianism; and Edessa was perforce committed to Byzantium.”100 This religious competition developed as the Church of the East self-evaluated its theology, and by the sixth century this had become a competition between Miaphysites and Dyophysites. The schism between East and West Syrian Christianity stratified Miaphysites out of the Persian Empire. Emperor Zeno made West Syrian Christian teachings illegal and expelled their adherents from the empire in the sixth century. Because politics now went hand in hand with dogma, the Edessans were forced to remain loyal to the Byzantines. For them this meant holding on to the Miaphysite aspects of their Christian understanding, and letting go of Dyophysite Eastern Christian beliefs for fear of persecution.

As long as the Byzantines controlled Edessa, the Persians were not able to advance their territorial ambitions significantly. However, when the Persians finally conquered Edessa in 609 CE, they were able to achieve sweeping expansion to the West and South. The geopolitical importance of the city within the conflict between the Sassanids and the Byzantines affected the ability of certain versions within the Christian religion to grow. With the example of this city,

99 Segal, p. 116.
100 Segal, p. 116.
one can see how the political overlords of a given region had a significant influence over the version of Christianity that was able to grow. For this reason, Segal concludes that, “the Edessans had come to bear an intense hatred for the Imperial church. It did not lead them to collaborate with the Persians; but it certainly encouraged them to admit the Moslems into the gates of Edessa.”

The conquest of Persia and parts of Byzantium by the Arabs in the seventh century was rapid and widespread because there was little ability, or desire, to resist among the general population. The constant pressure caused by the Persian-Roman conflicts severely impacted the ability for the Church of the East to grow, as seen in the Edessene example.

The political history of the Persian Empire was formed in the fourth through seventh centuries by a continuous rivalry with the Roman Empire. The political back and forth meant a systematic turnover of land on the border between the two superpowers. The cultural exchange caused by this spurred the spread of Christianity throughout the East, as refugees from the conflicts moved east and west as they picked sides. The Syrian Christian church owed much of its development to the forceful hand of the Persians in the east. Because of the sporadic persecution of Christians by the Sassanid emperors for their alignment with the religion of the enemy, the East Syrian Church distinguished itself as especially Dyophysite and distinct from the Chalcedonian version of that teaching articulated by Chalcedon. The result of this was protection under the Sassanid emperors, and the persecution of Miaphysite Christians within Persia. The schism between East and West Syrian Christianity engendered self-evaluation in all parties. This caused the construction of ecclesiastical sees across the Persian Empire for the East Syrians. The creation of an actual Patriarch of the East in Seleucia-Ctesiphon epitomized the solidification of a distinct religion. The missionary work spread by the cities throughout the east engendered

101 Segal, p. 116.
growth and popularity for East Syrian Christianity. However, the Church of the East grew out of a tumultuous history, one marked by sporadic persecution and continual political and imperial changes of fortune. This meant that they were adaptable and used to being a minority. As seen in the example of Edessa, in many places the persecution from both Persia and Rome caused unrest and distaste for powerful overlords. When the Arabs finally conquered the Persian Empire, this history of adaptability and defiance would inform the reactions of seventh century Eastern Christians and prove crucial in their attempts to preserve their established Church of the East in the face of new conquerors.
Chapter 3

The Church of the East’s Reaction to the Islamic Conquest of Persia

The Islamic conquests of the seventh century mark one of the most impressive feats of empire ever seen. The Arabs’ success in rapidly seizing vast amounts of territory from the two dominant imperial powers of the late ancient world, then holding on to it for centuries, is almost unmatched with the exception of the Mongols’ Golden Horde. One long-term result of this huge victory manifested itself in the spread of Islam throughout Central Asia and the Near East. Including the Church of the East, as well as the Byzantines and Copts, one can estimate that some 300 Christian dioceses were taken over during this conquest.\footnote{Wilmshurst, p. 94.} This chapter examines how the Church of the East, with an already-established identity crafted in the face of intermittent persecution under the Sassanids, adapted to the new reality brought about by the Arab conquests.

David Wilmshurst argues that the biggest geopolitical change the Syrian Christians experienced in the seventh century was the Persian-Roman conflict from 602-628 CE. It was not until the Christians began to reflect on the religious element of the Arab empire that they felt a serious threat to their existence. Michael Penn refers to this as the ‘Islamization’ of the Arabs in the eyes of the Eastern Christians, referring to their realization in the late seventh century that the Arab conquerors were not Christians. Prior to this realization, and prior to the increasing pressure to convert to Islam after two dangerous civil wars, the Church of the East writers felt that the political changes were something mundane, and typical for the tumultuous region in which they had lived for centuries.
The victory of the Romans over the Persians in 628 CE gave hope to many that a golden age of peace was starting in the Near East. However, at the same time that Heraclius was celebrating his capture of Jerusalem from the Persians, in 630 CE Muhammad (d. 632 CE) was returning victoriously to Mecca in Arabia as the leader of the Islamic world. Having grown in power since 622 CE in Yathrib (present day Medina), Muhammad then died in 632 CE. At this time, Wilmshurst argues that it was unlikely anyone in the Western world had ever heard of him. His successor, Abu Bakr, then consolidated the tribes of Arabia over two years in the ridda wars from 632 to 633 CE.

Wilmshurst recounts the sudden and unexpected Islamic takeover of the Persian Empire, “in 634, two years after the death of Muhammad, Arab armies under the command of his successor Abu Bakr burst out of the confines of the Arabian peninsula to begin an astonishing career of conquest.” Having been weakened by generations of war with the Roman Byzantines, the Persians stood little chance of defending themselves against the Arab raiders. However, Philip Jenkins argues that for the populations of the Empire this actually proved to be to their benefit. “A fast conquest,” Jenkins writes, “meant that cities largely survived intact, and so did their social and ecclesiastical structures.” In reaction to the quick conquest of their lands, some Christians fled from their homes and sought exile in the Roman Empire. A very small number of Eastern Christians converted to Islam. The large majority of members of the Church of the East remained where they were, confident in the insignificance of yet another political turnover.

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103 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, p. 7  
104 Wilmshurst, p. 96.  
105 Wilmshurst, p. 96.  
107 Wilmshurst, p. 94.
The Christian conceptualization of, and reaction to, Islam changed over time as the Church of the East learned more about the religion of their conquerors. Doctrinal disagreements, especially over the identity of Jesus, caused the relationship between the Eastern Christians and Muslims to become more hostile, and therefore the writings of the second and third generations of conquered Christians turned apocalyptic, then defensive. Traditionally, these biographies, narrative chronicles, theological disputations, apocalypses, letters, and scriptural commentaries have been interpreted by Islamic scholars to be indicators that Christians welcomed the Arab conquests.\(^\text{108}\) This is the memory of the victors, who purposefully point out the Roman-Persian conflicts and the Arabs’ liberation of the Christians from persecution. However, a new generation of scholars has revisited the primary sources left behind by Christians in Persia.

Penn advances this revisionist interpretation of the Christian reaction to conquests, which challenges the notion that these Christians viewed the Arab raiders as liberators. He argues that “although most Syriac writers had considerable theological disagreements with Byzantines and Persian rulers, not until the mid-ninth century did any suggest that the conquests were beneficial to Christianity.”\(^\text{109}\) In fact, for the first two centuries of Islamic rule, Syrian Christians focused on answering one question: why Christianity had been subjected to a new and very different political authority from the Sassanids under whom they had long co-existed?

Under the Islamic Caliphate, the Church of the East’s growth stagnated.\(^\text{110}\) However, this does not mean it was in the decline. During the seventh and early eighth centuries, the Church persisted and solidified, but it did not expand. As it did when faced with Persian persecutions, the Church of the East, during the first century of Islamic rule, underwent significant self-

\(^\text{109}\) Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, p. 17
\(^\text{110}\) Wilmshurst, p. 96.
evaluation in order to survive. This chapter examines the contemporaneous trends in Christian literature accessible to scholars today. Although not extensive, due to poor preservation, the primary documents recently reevaluated prove that the Church of the East was fully aware of its theology and its place in the world, when the Arabs took over. When first conquered, the immediate literary response was inconsequential, signifying the mundane reaction to yet another political conflict. After two Arab civil wars, the Islamization and Arabization policies that began under caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 705 CE) engendered terror in Christian writers, causing a series of apocalyptic texts fearing the end of the Church of the East and the world itself. Finally, when catastrophe did not ensue, Christians in the Church of the East settled into life under their new rulers, writing a series of defenses and apologies to prove that, just as they had done under the Persians, they could craft a kind of coexistence between the two religions. It is this important century that created a peaceful, positive environment for coexistence between Muslims and Eastern Christians in the eighth century. According to the earliest documents available today, the immediate reactions to the Islamic conquests describe how the relationship between the Church of the East and the Arab conquerors developed over the first century of the Islamic Empire. In these documents, we can see that the Church of the East’s earliest writers completed the difficult task of experiencing, explaining, and accepting the Islamic Empire in order to survive. Without this critical century of Eastern Christian writing, the structure of the Church of the East would not have survived to spread further east into Asia, where it survives today.
In 635 CE, Arab soldiers invaded Syria and Palestine, beginning the rapid takeover of the lands of the Persian Sassanid Empire. In that year, the Battle of Yarmuk proved to be one of the most significant, devastating, and shocking defeats suffered by the Byzantines at the hands of the Arabs.\textsuperscript{111} Thousands of Byzantines were killed, and the Arabs marched steadily through the Near East. Jerusalem surrendered shortly after the first invasions, as the Arabs simultaneously conquered Egypt and Alexandria.\textsuperscript{112} The Persian capital at Seleucia-Ctesiphon was occupied in 636 CE. Whereas the Byzantines were able to preserve their western lands from the invaders, the entire Persian Empire fell within two decades. The last of the Sassanid kings, Yazdgird III, was killed in 651 CE in Merv, marking the end of one of the world’s then-superpowers. At this point, less than twenty years had passed between the first raids conducted by the Arabs and the point at which every Persian territory had now become part of the newly formed Arab Empire.\textsuperscript{113}

Although this rapid political takeover shocked the ancient world, the social and economic structure was not fundamentally changed to the extent that one might expect. This is because, Penn argues, the Persian Sassanids were unable to resist the Islamic raiders long enough to result in war damage to the general population. Within half a century, the Church of the East Christians in many of the now-defunct Persian lands had experienced no less than four changes in political overlords.\textsuperscript{114} Furthermore, the taxes and minority representation policies that the Muslims enacted in the early years of the empire largely resembled the Sassanids’. Without much damage

\textsuperscript{111} Penn, \textit{Envisioning Islam}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{112} Wilmshurst, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{113} Wilmshurst, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{114} Jenkins, p. 10.
to the population, the Church of the East Christians were not surprised that yet again, their overlords had been replaced.

In the twenty short years of warfare between the Arab invaders and the Persians, Christians took note of the political changes happening around them in passive, informational records of events. They noted the battles and changes in rulers as just another phase in their long history of political conflicts. Furthermore, no Christian writers during this time concentrated on, or fully noticed, the religious aspect of the Islamic conquests. The earliest accounts present the conquests as simply another military turning point, where their lands were taken over by a foreign ruler. In these earliest documents, the Muslims were referred to as ‘Hagars’ or ‘tayyaye,’ each most accurately translated to Arabs. This term can be traced back to the Genesis story of Abraham’s concubine Hagar, who bore him his first child, named Ishmael. At times, Christian writers also referred to the Arabs as ‘Sons of Hagar,’ or ‘Sons Ishmael,’ shortened to ‘Ishmaelites.’ These titles depict a shared history between the Muslims and the Christians, while also noting differences in race. Penn argues that in the first two decades of the Islamic Empire, “Syriac authors did not speak about Islam as a religion, and they certainly did not depict the conquests as a clash of civilizations.”115 Not until the end of the seventh century, when the Islamic caliph made a point to differentiate Islam from Christianity and to denounce Christian understanding, did Christian writers recognize the new overlords as anything other than perhaps a different variation of themselves.

The earliest documentation of the conquests written anonymously by a Syrian Christian, now known as Account of 637, refers to the tayyaye’s success in battle. It is fragmented and

115 Penn, Envisioning Islam, p. 19.
poorly preserved, written on a blank page of a Syriac Bible. Less than a page long, this source contains a short description of the victories of Muhammad,

Many villages were destroyed through the killing by … Muhammad and many people were killed. And captives … from Galilee to Bet … Those Arabs camped by … we saw … everywhe[re] .. and the … that they … and … them. On the tw[enty si]xth of May, … went from Emesa. The Romans pursued them … on the tenth …

The author addresses the conquerors as ‘tayyaye,’ depicting how Christians saw their conquerors as simply a secular, tribal entity. The content of this short source includes only the battles fought in close proximity to the author. This brief description expresses no serious concern over the events it includes, but provides historians a glimpse of the earliest terminology used by Christians for Muslims invaders.

Similarly, the Chronicle ad 640 is a short reference to the political events of the conquests. This primary source was written by a Miaphysite priest named Thomas who documented the battles that were happening around him as Persian lands changed hands. Like the Account of 637, the Chronicle ad 640 referred to the Muslim invaders simply as the ‘tayyaye of Muhammad,’ or, the Arabs of Muhammad. There is no distinctly Islamic religious significance to this title, as was recognized by later Christian writers. Immediately following the conquests, the Church of the East understood Muhammad to be a successful king who started the Islamic Empire, but not a prophet.

Wilmshurst makes the argument that Christians cautiously welcomed the Arabs in Mesopotamia because they believed their ascendancy would end the persecution they had

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suffered during the six years after Heraclius had taken back the land from the Persians. The Christians were less threatened by the Arabs than their fellow Christians the Byzantines, because the Chalcedonian Byzantines had sought retribution for the heretics’ part in the invasion of the Roman Empire and the theft of the True Cross relic. In fact, a similar sentiment was felt throughout the Persian lands as the Arabs took over. The Arabs focused on the Zoroastrians as the immediate enemy to their empire, because it had been the state religion of the Persian Sassanids. For this reason, Zoroastrians were persecuted during the conquests and Christians were left alone.\textsuperscript{118} Nonetheless, contemporary Christian writers knew that they would remain in a subjugated position whether Persian Zoroastrians or Arabs, who were obviously not Church of the East Christians, were rulers of their land.

We know now that the Arab conquerors were seizing land with the intent to spread their religion. In hindsight, it is clear that the persecution of Zoroastrians was not strictly about subduing the enemy’s state religion. In the \textit{Qur’an}, the fire worshipping traditions of Zoroastrianism were explicitly forbidden.\textsuperscript{119} Wilmshurst argues that, “Arab conquerors treated Zoroastrians with great harshness, partly because, as the dominant religion in Persia, Zoroastrianism represented a challenge to Islam which could not be ignored, and partly because they were repelled by its beliefs and practices, unlike those of Judaism and Christianity.”\textsuperscript{120} The Arabs also recognized that the \textit{Qur’an} mentioned Christianity and Judaism as its predecessors. For this reason, they enacted specific laws which allowed Jews and Christians to remain minorities within the Islamic Caliphate. Muslims called Jews and Christians ‘Peoples of the Book,’ or ‘ahl al-kitab,’ because they honored the prophets Abraham and Jesus. Muslims

\textsuperscript{118} Wilmshurst, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{119} Jenkins, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{120} Wilmshurst, p. 98
believed these men to be true prophets, and forerunners for their own prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, Judaism and Christianity were considered to be predecessor religions to Islam. These ‘Peoples of the Book’ were therefore treated as a protected community, which they referred to as the ‘dhimmi,’ that was granted certain privileges over the Zoroastrians.  

As the Arabs took over Persian lands, they set in place taxes and laws that would keep the Christians subjugated, but did not prevent their existence. The Christians had to pay a poll tax, known as a ‘jizyah,’ which was higher than what an average Muslim had to pay. On the surface, this was not an alien or novel practice to the Christians. Under the Sassanids, they experienced the same basic structure of church-state interactions. The new Caliphs, like Persian Emperors, dealt directly with the leaders of the Church. They were forbidden from converting Muslims to Christianity, just as they were forbidden from preaching against Zoroastrianism. Wilmshurst even argues that, at first, the conquerors discouraged conversions from Jews and Christians because they were motivated by the need for collecting taxes from these two protected groups.  

In the first twenty years of the Islamic Caliphate, the Christians were unfazed by yet another political change. The Church of the East’s disinterest in its new overlords can explain the lack of sources dating from the first two decades of the Islamic Empire. Modern scholars have reinterpreted the immediate reaction to the conquests by Syrian Christians in Persia to be that of insignificance, rather than liberation, for this reason. Having survived persecutions by the Byzantines, Persian-Roman conflicts, and centuries of subjugation, Christians and their leaders did not notice any threat to their existence in what seemed to be just another set of wars, this time with a new victor. It was not until the murder of Caliph Uthman (d. 656 CE) and two severe civil 

\[121\] Wilmshurst, p. 95.  
\[122\] Wilmshurst, p. 95.
wars between Islamic successors that Christians knew that Islam was in fact a new religion that would test the Church of the East yet again.

**Realization of Islam and Apocalyptic Literature, 656 – 705 CE**

In 656 CE, the reigning caliph Uthman was murdered by an opposing group of Muslims dissatisfied with his leadership. This internal debate thrust the Islamic Empire into its first of two civil wars, or ‘fitnas.’ The first fitna lasted from 656 to 661 CE, and then was rapidly followed up by the second fitna beginning in 680 CE. The uncertainty of caliphal lineage caused instability within the newly established empire. For the Syrian Christians, these civil wars could have brought an end to the Arab conquerors, continuing the pattern of instability with which they were, from centuries of experience, familiar. However, in the last years of the second fitna, specifically after ‘Abd al-Malik conquered Mesopotamia for himself, Christians began to realize that the civil wars would not destroy the tayyaye as they thought.123 Instead, Penn argues that the political situation of the Islamic Empire dramatically shifted following the civil wars, and concludes that “at the end of the seventh century, during the second fitna and the caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik, the conquests took on a greater importance. Their reassessments [by Christians] resulted in a brief but dramatic spate of Syriac apocalypses.”124

The reason for this dramatic change, argues Penn, was the Islamization championed by ‘Abd al-Malik following the end of the civil wars. The religious aspect of the resulting Umayyad dynasty challenged the heterogenic structure of multiple religious minorities that had been

allowed during the early years of the Islamic Empire. This engendered political and religious challenges for the Church of the East, which had not expected to be subjugated even further. Under ‘Abd al-Malik, Islam was central to imperial success. Having witnessed several decades of Muslim rule before coming into power in the late seventh century, his caliphate began to see Christians as obstinate and misguided because they still refused to accept Islam, and therefore they needed to be reminded of their inferior status.\textsuperscript{125}

Subjugation of Christians expanded beyond poll taxes under the Umayyad Dynasty. Christians had to wear a distinctive belt and turban to publicly humiliate them. The Church of the East could not build new churches, nor could they interrupt any Muslim worship with church bells, singing, or public prayer. They could not carry weapons or ride horses. Mixed marriages were allowed, but laws ensured that property and inheritance went to the Muslim side of the family. In a court of law, Christian testimony was worth far less than Muslims’. Wilmshurst argues that these subjugating practices did not reflect the sporadic persecution of the Sassanids, but instead revealed a novel and now constant and unrelenting pressure to convert to Islam with the intention of preventing any possible growth of the Church of the East.

Christian theologians during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik were shocked by this new challenge to their beliefs, where their conception of God was dismissed as sinful. Muslims began to understand in more detail the tenets of Christian theology, and in doing so, they noticed inconsistencies with Islam they had not previously seen. Wilmshurst states that “for all the common moral and ethical ground between the three religions, and for all Islam’s historical debt to its predecessors, these uncompromising propositions placed the new religion in irreconcilable
conflict with Judaism and Christianity.” According to Islamic theologians, Muhammad was the final and most accurate messenger of God. Furthermore, God was a single unit, not a trinity as the Christians believed. The promulgation of the teaching that Jesus was the only son of God was entirely incorrect to the Muslims; to them, God had no earthly sons, and Jesus was just a prophet.

In order to promote Islam as the state religion of the empire, ‘Abd al-Malik constructed the Dome of the Rock in the Christian holy city of Jerusalem. The inside of this structure housed polemics against Christianity, pointing out the Trinitarian mistakes specifically. The inscriptions proclaim ‘Abd al-Malik’s mission to solidify Islam as the correct successor to Christianity. To further spread this message, the caliph included anti-Christian messages on imperial coins and public signs. This created a challenge for the Christians who had previously thought that, at worst, their conquerors believed a different variation of Christianity than they did. From this point on, a negative connotation was attached to the references of the ‘Hagars’ or ‘Sons of Ishmael’ in Christian writings. Despite the shared history, then, under ‘Abd al-Malik Islam became a threat to the survival of the Church of the East.

Instead of seeing the Arab conquest as a mundane political turnover, the Christians had to reinterpret the conquest as something much more earth shattering than they had expected. God could not be promoting another religion over theirs, so he must be punishing them with the end of the world. The generation of apocalyptic writers engendered by the solidification of an Islamic identity for the Umayyad Dynasty sought to explain why God would allow another religious group to conquer, subjugate, and denounce their Church. These apocalyptic texts each predict the

126 Wilmshurst, p. 99.
127 Penn, _Envisioning Islam_, p. 28.
impending doom of the earth, being carried out by this evil race of Muslims. A fundamental point that apocalyptic writers made was that God was allowing the Arabs to conquer them in order to fully destroy the Byzantines as they had destroyed the Persians a few years earlier. However, the Muslims would not be around long, according to Eastern Christian writers in the late seventh century. In apocalyptic writings, Christians interpreted the conquests to be a tool of destruction God used to wipe out all sinners, and then the Muslims themselves would too be destroyed finally, marking the end of humanity.\textsuperscript{128}

The first apocalyptic text appeared as the turning point of Syrian Christian writers in the second half of the seventh century, titled, \textit{Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem}. Named for the famous Syrian Bishop Ephrem (d. 363), the apocalypse is written in poetic verses describing the terrible qualities of the Hagars. Two lines read, “They will kill the bridegroom in his bedroom, and expel the bride from her bridal chamber, they will take a wife away from her husband, and slaughter her like a lamb.”\textsuperscript{129} The author claims that the Christians were conquered by such evil men because they were being punished for Byzantine impiety. These conquerors were just as evil as the Byzantines, and in turn they would receive the same punishment with the end of the world. The author describes mythological armies of angels would destroy the Muslims. Then the world would witness the coming of the antichrist, and the Day of Judgment.\textsuperscript{130}

Similarly, the \textit{Book of Main Points}, written by John bar Penkaye in 687 CE just outside of Nisibis, predicts the end of the world. This apocalyptic text was written during the second fitna, responding to theological questions being raised by the increasingly Islamic environment

\textsuperscript{128} Penn, \textit{Envisioning Islam}, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{129} Author Unknown, \textit{Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem}. Trans. Michael Philip Penn. N.p.: University of California Press, 2015
\textsuperscript{130} Penn, \textit{When Christians First Met Muslims}, p. 38.
into which the Persian world was being incorporated. Because John bar Penkaye was writing from a monastery not yet under the control of the Arabs, in modern day Iraq, his writing takes an outsider’s view of the Muslims. His fear of conquest by these Hagars caused him, like Pseudo-Ephrem, to question why God was allowing this type of chaos. In the Book of Main Points, the argument is made that the Roman theological error in the fourth century (referring, of course, to the Chalcedonian doctrine) resulted in God deciding to send the Arabs to conquer the Byzantines. They were sent to Persia to conquer and punish the Sassanids, who had also persecuted the Syrian Christians sporadically. Unlike other apocalyptic writers, John bar Penkaye then makes the assumption that humanity had lost its chance to repent. According to his writing, “the end of ages” would be ushered in quickly, as the last of humanity was destroyed.

The next Syriac response to the Arab civil wars was written in 692 CE, after the victory of ‘Abd al-Malik. It is titled Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius after the fourth century bishop and martyr Methodius (d. 312). In this text, the depiction of the Arabs is substantially more negative than anything seen previously. The Syriac text answers the question why God had allowed the Muslims to conquer the Christians, stating, “It is not because God loves them that He allowed them to enter and take control of the Christians’ kingdom, rather on account of the iniquity and sin done by Christians, the like of which was not done by any previous generation.” These sins, according to the author, were so great that they could not be repented

131 Penn, When Christians First Met Muslims, p. 86.
133 Penn, When Christians First Met Muslims, p. 108.
of, but rather, required the total destruction of humanity. In this version, the apocalypse will come with the victory of an eschatological Greek king over the Muslims, followed by the appearance of the anti-Christ.\textsuperscript{135}

The \textit{Edessene Apocalypse} follows the same storyline as the \textit{Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem} written several years earlier. It adds the symbolic imagery of the cross and of the city of Jerusalem in order to enforce the reaction to ‘Abd al-Malik’s actions as caliph. At the same time as the caliph was establishing an Islamic center at Jerusalem with the construction of the Dome of the Rock, and was restricting public displays of the cross, this apocalyptic text depicted the end of the world taking place on the steps of the city of Jerusalem, with the cross being central to the end of the world narrative.\textsuperscript{136}

The final apocalyptic text written by a Syrian Christian was the \textit{Apocalypse of John the Little}. This version states that the Muslims will “trample Persia with the hooves of their armies’ horses and subdue it. And they will devastate Rome. None will be able to stand before them because [this] was commanded them by the holy one of heaven.”\textsuperscript{137} Just as his contemporaries had, the author of this text explained that the Arabs were tools of destruction inflicted by God to punish the Christians.

These apocalyptic texts reflect the doom that the Church of the East felt during the first years of Islamization. Once their conquerors identified themselves as adamantly Islamic, the safety of the Church of the East was threatened. This was something that the Syrian Christians had not experienced before, despite the tumultuous political environment they had long been

\textsuperscript{135} Penn, \textit{When Christians First Met Muslims}, p. 110.
accustomed to in Persia. Never before had an overlord specifically enumerated the reasons why their religion was incorrect and inadequate. Interestingly enough, these immensely dramatic apocalyptic texts were almost all written during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik. They were short lived because it became apparent that the Islamic Empire would not fall apart, as the Christian writers had hoped and predicted in their apocalyptic writings. Although the Syrian Christian theology was being challenged, perhaps they would be able to defend themselves as they had in the days of the Persian Sassanids. The Umayyad Dynasty proved over the next generation to have solidified the Islamic Empire out of its chaotic period of civil wars, and stability was regained in the Near East.

Defense of the Church of the East to the Muslims, 705 – 750 CE

When ‘Abd al-Malik died, and the extreme Islamization of the empire decreased in intensity, Syrian Christians began to realize that these conquerors could be there to stay. Once the Umayyad Dynasty was established, stability re-emerged within the empire. The possible threat to political stability posed by a substantial non-Islamic population declined, lessening fears on the part of the Caliphate’s rulers. Christian anxieties also lessened countered by the pragmatic desires to survive as a Church. Syriac writers could not argue that the end of the world had not, in fact, come. For this reason, they shifted tactics. Memories of the Islamic conquest moved away from apocalyptic texts, and instead turned to defensive strategies. Penn argues that by around the year 705 CE, “Syriac narratives of identity often minimized the conceptual distance between Christianity and Islam as an apologetic strategy.”

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Furthermore, Syrian Christians now tried to minimize the significance of the Arab conquests altogether. This was in their own self-interest, as they needed to prove that coexistence was possible with the Muslims. Once the excitement of the conquests had died down, and stability was found in the Umayyad dynasty, Syrian writers composed dialogues between Arab and Christian monks, where they could explain the theological differences between the two religions in a commonplace setting. This group of writers comprises an extremely significant piece of Syrian Christian history. Had the leaders of the Church of the East not taken pragmatic steps to prove that they were not a threat to Islam, the golden age of Bishop Timothy in the late eighth century would never have been possible.

One of the first apologies written was the *Scholia* of Jacob of Edessa. He uses Biblical precedents to explain that the Arab conquests were not earth shattering, but actually resembled history. The *Scholia* draws parallels between the punishment inflicted on Jerusalem because of Judah and the Israelites in the tenth century BCE, in 1 Kings 14:21-28, arguing that the Arab conquests were a similar punishment for sinners. The point of his argument was to prove that the Islamic conquests could be dealt with. Jacob of Edessa warns that as in this Biblical story, captivity under foreign invaders could potentially last for a long time, but eventually God would accept their repentance. To Christians reading this, it was reassuring that there was nothing novel about their subjugation under the Islamic caliphate—indeed, it strengthened their sense of continuity with Biblical history and their own identity crafted under long persecutions endured during the Sassanid empire’s fluctuating treatment of Christians.

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139 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, p. 34.
Another strategy used by Syrian Christian writers in this formative period was to downplay the significance of the conquests from the perspective of a long history. In two sources, *Chronicle ad 705* and *Chronicle of Disasters*, the Arab invasions are listed alongside every other traumatic event in history. *Chronicle ad 705* simply enumerated the number of rulers, including Muhammad, that had been in the region recently. However, in this context, Muhammad was not referred to as the leader of the Muslims, or the founder of a threatening religion, but just as a king. In the *Chronicle of Disasters*, the problems of the Middle East were listed in order. These included phenomena such as earthquakes, hailstorms, plagues, droughts, locust infestations, and conquests. Only twice are the Arabs mentioned in the entire document. Penn argues that, “by reducing the rise of Islam to simply a list of kings or sandwiching the notice of a new caliph between one hailstorm that damages vineyards and another that destroys birds, these texts domesticated the conquests.”

In the 720’s, a well-known dialogue between Syrian Christian and an Arab circulated in defense of the theological differences between the two religions. The full name of this dialogue was *The Disputation Between a Monk of Bet Hale and an Arab Notable*, and it was written anonymously. The discussion between the two men covers common theological issues that were raised by the imposing Arab Muslims, as well as curious Syrian Christians. These included details about Christian theology, relics, and the *Qur’an*. It also tried to explain the meaning behind the conquests in a much less dramatic way than the earlier apocalyptic writers. The Arab in the dialogue talks about how many Muslims would possibly convert to Christianity, were it not for the political and economic repercussions. The Arab also discusses how the success of

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141 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, p. 36.
the Islamic military meant, to him, that God supported their religion. The monk then responds to
this argument with the fact that not all territories on earth were controlled by the Muslims,
meaning they were not God’s chosen people. The author’s purpose for this was to minimize the
geographical and historical significance of the conquests, and to defend Christian beliefs.

In each of these documents, the tone of the Christians has clearly shifted dramatically.
Instead of fearing for their lives, or for humanity as a whole, or being entirely unfazed,
Christians in the early seventh century attempted to fit their religion into the fabric of Islamic
society. They could not do this unless they actively defended themselves. This was not
unfamiliar to them, luckily, as they had done the same in the face of Persian persecutions. The
Islamic conquests challenged the Syrian Christian identity more than anything else in the history
of the Church of the East. However, it was this critical group of theologians who maintained the
existence of Christianity in the East, and allowed for the continuation of discussion between
Islamic and Christian leaders into the eighth and ninth century.
Chapter 4 Conclusions

Today, many people continue to view Christianity as a Western religion, centered in Europe. In fact, however, in the world of late antiquity, the Middle East was home to about one third of the total population of Christians globally. The question that arises if one looks at the history of global Christianity is simple: what happened to such a large Christian presence? This thesis was written for the purpose of answering that question by exploring some of this forgotten history. A close study of research done by recent scholars and rediscovered Syrian texts proves the importance of the Christian Church of the East within global Christian history, and moreover, argues that such an important community should be remembered correctly.

The first goal of this thesis has been to prove that Christianity in Persia and Syria developed out of a unique monotheistic history within their own communities, and not as a result of Roman exports. In order to establish an understanding of the value that the Church of the East has on global Christian history, one must first understand who this group of Christians was – correctly. The deep roots in Syria and Persia had been planted in earlier times in Jewish communities, out of which came the earliest followers of Jesus Christ. These communities provided a clear foundation for the success of a monotheistic church. Christianity grew in the East parallel to its growth in the West, without significant doctrinal differences for the first three centuries of the faith’s existence. Then, in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Roman Empire made Christianity a priority in its administration, beginning with Emperor Constantine ending persecutions in 313 CE. Following their toleration, and subsequent rise to the status of official state religion, Christians in Rome spent a century determining their exact theological interpretations of Jesus, Mary, and the Trinity.
It was during this time that certain issues arose in the East. Not all theologians agreed with the decisions being made in the Roman Empire. We can see the issues of Christology played out in Edessa in the writings from St. Ephrem, for example, who wrote informed reactions to the councils held within the Roman Empire. Ephrem and his colleagues exemplify the established theological bases of Christianity outside of the Roman Empire before the controversy involving Nestorius. St. Ephrem discusses the existence of a strain of Christianity called ‘dyophysites’ in Edessa. It was these people who were mistaken for ‘Nestorians.’ Because Nestorius became an infamous figure in the Roman Empire, for political reasons, his exile from Constantinople has been incorrectly linked with the beginning of a variant of Christianity in the East. Not only did Christians exist in the East before Nestorius, but, his theological interpretations of Jesus does not even match those of the dyophysite groups he was given credit for having influenced. The beginning of the Church of the East has been misrepresented by historians because little importance was put on a group of Christians who, mistakenly, were thought to be on the losing side of a Roman debate.

Although foundation for the Church of the East among dyophysite groups had been laid throughout the Persian Empire already in the early 300s, the consolidation of a Church structure came about as the result of political pressures. The Sassanid Dynasty took over the Persian Empire as the issues of theology were being played out in the Roman Empire. Under the Sassanids, Christians in the East suffered sporadic persecution for two reasons. First, the Sassanids’ state religion was Zoroastrianism. Secondly, the Persians were constantly at war with the Romans, who by that point championed Christianity. Thus, the Christians in the Persian Empire were seen as allies to the Roman enemy. Because of this, theologians within Eastern Christianity self-evaluated its Christological positions. In Antioch, the schism of East and West
Syrian Christianity exemplified the distinctions in Christology that were made as a result of the political pressures exerted by the Persians. In order to differentiate themselves from their Roman counterparts, theologians in Persia pointed out their dyophysite understanding of Christ. These defenses finally culminated in the establishment of an ecclesiastical hierarchy based at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, with a Patriarch of the East leading a consolidated Church of the East.

Along the shared borders of the Roman and Persian empires, the constant wars back and forth caused many Christians to be forced to either side. It is clear that the threat of persecutions forced many Christians to suffer. In Edessa, the majority of Christians did not support Chalcedonian Christianity. However, Roman military occupation of this city meant that they could not side with the Church of the East without the threat of death. In the Edessene example, among others, the political pressures that the Persian-Roman conflicts that had been forced on Christians significantly shaped the success of different variants of Christianity. This thesis argues that had the Persians not forced the hand of disparate groups of dyophysite Christians in the East, solidification would not have been achieved.

It was this solidified Church that was then tested in the seventh century by the Islamic conquests of Persia. The skills that the Church of the East leaders demonstrated in their defenses to the Sassanids were necessary to their survival of the total political upheaval of their home. The collection of documents that have survived that detail Eastern Christian reactions to the conquests provides crucial insight into the theological positions that had developed within the Church during Persian imperial rule. By evaluating these documents, the progress that the Church of the East had made in the previous two centuries becomes clear.

When the Islamic invaders rapidly conquered the entire Persian Empire, Eastern Christians expressed little immediate concern. Having been born out of an Empire in constant
conflict, many Christians in the East were unfazed by new political leadership. It was not until the Church of the East slowly recognized that Islam was in fact a different religion that Christian writers reacted negatively to their conquerors. What followed was a string of apocalyptic explanations for why Christianity was being condemned by Islamic overlords. However, when the world did not end, the leaders of the Church of the East changed tactics, instead defending the ability of the Christians to coexist with their Muslim rulers. Harkening back to the Persian defenses, these apologies were successful and allowed the survival of the Church of the East.

The focus of this thesis is the three centuries leading up to the golden age of the Church of the East. In the eighth and ninth centuries, the Patriarchate in the East was arguably more powerful than that of Rome. This would definitively not have been possible had it not been for the unique history that had shaped the content and eventually the structure of the Church of the East. Constant political turnovers, challenging religions, and threats of persecution taught the leaders of the Church of the East how to survive under the Islamic Empire. Today, the Church of the East exists in small regions of Asia, usually referred to as Assyrian Christians. However, it was the missionary work of Eastern Christians from the cities throughout the Middle East and Central Asia that spread Christianity throughout Asia, and whose presence in Iraq until the current century, has served as a reminder of the global history of early Christianity.

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