

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN NESTORIANS AND MONOPHYSITES: BARSAUMA'S ACTIVITY

Hovhannes Khorikyan

*Doctor in History, M. Nalbandyan State
University of Shirak Foundation, Gyumri*

hovhkor78@mail.ru

DOI: 10.54503/1829-4618-2022.2(16)-51

Abstract

The article shows that the Sasanian monarchs in one way or another used to take into account the importance of Syriac role in the state economy. The Christian craftsmen and merchants paid colossal taxes to the state treasury. Indeed, Nestorianism antagonized the official Byzantine church; spreading out from Mesopotamia, it was the creed of the merchants, the class who sought independence, which confronted Zoroastrianism in Iran. The Armenian Church, being national in nature, had such an intolerant position against the Byzantine church and Barsauma. At the time when the Christian church was divided into Monophysites and Dyophysites, and the Byzantines persecuted the Nestorians, the latter settled in Iran and from that time on the Persians changed their attitude towards the Christians and started to patronize the Nestorians, who were the enemies of Byzantine Chalcedonianism.

In ancient and medieval ages, the ethnic affiliation was directly related to the practicing of religion, the Syrians were Christians, and the Persians were Zoroastrians. This factor forced the Syrians to have their own establishment and under its patronage they could exist. They were unified around the church and the union of the craftsmen ensured the financial support.

Keywords: Nestorians, Monophysites, Dyophysites, Barsauma, Syrians, Persians, Christian Church, Armenian Primary Sources

The doctrinal struggle between the Nestorians and the Monophysites became the subject of heated debates in the 5th century. Purely doctrinal disputes further deepened the existing gap between the mentioned directions. In this regard, it is necessary to pay attention to the relations between the Monophysite Syrians and the Armenian Church, which is quite well studied in Armenology, but is hardly covered in foreign research. Simeon of Beth Arsham, a bitter enemy of Nestorianism, collected documents from Greeks, Armenians and Syrians all over Iran that they were against Nestor's doctrine. Simeon of Beth Arsham participated in the Church Council of Dvin in 506 and took a confessional paper from Armenians that they were far from Nestorianism.¹ The delegates from Iran also took similar confessional papers from the Georgians and Albanians participating in the council.² From a letter³ of Hovhannes Gabeghentsi

¹ Ter-Minasyan 1971b: 39.

² Ter-Minasyan 1971b: 42; Book of Letters 1901: 183.

addressed to the bishops of Caucasian Albania it becomes clear that Nestorianism and Chalcedonianism had strengthened in Caucasian Albania. The letter denounced all the schismatics, especially the founders of Nestorianism and the Council of Chalcedon, along with Leo's Tome. Priest Matheos was sent to Caucasian Albania to fight against the schismatics; bishops from Caucasian Albania were advised to persecute and expel the schismatics and to send three or more bishops to Armenia to recognize the true knowledge of faith.⁴

At the request of Monophysite Syrians, for example, the Julianites, the Armenian Church defended them in doctrinal disputes, and the Armenian Catholicos ordained their bishops. Catholicos Nerses II ordained the Julianite Abdisho, who came to his homeland – Syria after receiving a paper about that.⁵ This position of the Armenian Church frightened the Nestorians. In general, it can be seen that the Syriac churches “hugely value the opinion of their Armenian neighbors and continuously work to maintain communication with them; or if they do not have that communication, they somehow try to create such a relationship”. Expanding on that thought, Y. Ter-Minasyants writes: “And that is understandable: Syria's neighbors had seen how the Armenian church courageously fought for its faith against the powerful Persians and emerged from the long unequal struggle honorably and victorious. They saw that the Persians even behaved differently with the Armenians, respecting their powerful princes. So why not maintain ecclesiastical communication with that church, especially since all relations with the Greek Church had already ceased?”⁶ It is no coincidence that the metropolitan bishops of the Mor Mattai monastery, the main center of Monophysitism, were ordained by the Armenian Catholicos.⁷

After the death of Rabulas,⁸ the renowned bishop of Edessa, during the reign of his successor Ibas, the influence of the Nestorians was strengthened in Edessa. His death in 457 brought about a powerful opposition, and all the Nestorian archimandrites were driven from Edessa to the Persian land. The final blow was struck in 489 by the closing of the castle of Nestorianism - the famous school of Edessa called Persian school.⁹ The weaker the supporters of Nestorius became in the Greek lands, the stronger they became under Persian rule, especially enjoying the patronage of King Peroz.

The Persians had no particular policy towards Christians living within their state, although Persian officials were always suspicious of Christians and considered them to

³ Book of Letters 1901: 81-84.

⁴ Ter-Minasyan 1971a: 377-378.

⁵ Ter-Minasyants 2009: 86, 102; Ayvazyan 1976: 63.

⁶ Ter-Minasyants 2009: 89.

⁷ Ter-Minasyants 2009: 109.

⁸ Atiya 1968: 248.

⁹ Baum, Winkler 2003 (eds.): 26.

be a strong support for the Byzantine Empire in their country. They occasionally organized strong persecution against Christians, but for the most part they facilitated their activities.

That lenience was the result of the fact that in the Persian empire the Christians did a very important job in the field of handicrafts, production of goods, especially in the field of international trade, and, in addition, enriched the royal treasury and the pockets of the elite with the taxes collected from them. The situation changed when Yazdegerd II (438-457) ascended the throne of Persia. With his new domestic policy he tried to concentrate all the resources in the hands of Persians and, by converting the Christians, finally deprive them of other cultural and political relations and connect them with Persia. But his tactics did not justify itself, and the King of Kings Peroz (459-484) that succeeded him, took a better path. Following the former Persian policy, he again tried to take advantage of the conflicts between the Christian churches. Syriac sources say that the reason for that change, i.e. the person who prompted Peroz to do so, was Mtsbin's bishop Barsauma.¹⁰ That is why the Nestorian authors of Syria give Peroz high praise,¹¹ perhaps referring to this change in Persian ecclesiastical policy. The zealous Barsauma managed to inspire Peroz the idea that Christians would never willingly attach themselves to Persian rule and would not turn their eyes away from the emperors until the chasm in religion separated them.¹² Therefore, it was necessary to advance and encourage Nestorianism, to forcibly make Christians of other faiths join the Nestorian, supposedly state church.¹³

Advancing thanks to the "Persian School", Barsauma paid exceptional attention to education. In 457, after Ibas's death, the opponents of Dyophysitism became active in Edessa;¹⁴ Barsauma left the city to organize an Academy in Mtsbin where a large number of teachers and students from the Edessa school settled.¹⁵ Thanks to its school, Mtsbin became the spiritual center of the Nestorian Church, although the seat of the Catholicos was located in the capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon.¹⁶ By dictating such a political line to the Persian court, Barsauma, certainly, not only served the Persian government, but with such measures also wanted to unite the Christian churches and believers under the rule of the Nestorian Church. Barsauma's measures were beneficial for the Persians, because by concentrating and consolidating those forces, a strong front could be created against Byzantium and the Byzantine Church under its direct patronage. Influenced by Zoroastrian clergy, Peroz sponsored Barsauma to officially

¹⁰ Chabot 1901: 123. Barsauma was born in Corduene and was a slave; he was freed and came to study in the famous school of Edessa under Bishop Ibas of Edessa (See Melkonyan 1976: 246, n. 49).

¹¹ Sources Syriaces 1908: 147.

¹² Adonts 2006: 33.

¹³ Labourt 1904: 135.

¹⁴ Labourt 1904: 130-152.

¹⁵ Macomber 1958: 143-144; Pigulevskaya 1956: 340.

¹⁶ Ter-Petrosyan 1979: 82.

make the church in Iran Nestorian.¹⁷ Therefore, in this sense, the killings of Christians were aimed at the merging and unification of the Christian churches of Iran rather than prohibiting or hindering the spread and advance of Christianity.

The Syrian historian says that in order to achieve his goal, he resorted to various means: as a Persian army commander¹⁸ he used force, persecution, exile and imprisonment with the help of the army; he handed over to the King of Kings Peroz the letter written by the Nestorian Church Catholicos Babua to the Emperor of Byzantium (it was written in the letter: “God has given us a cursed kingdom”), and as a consequence of Barsauma’s betrayal the Catholicos was accused of espionage and beheaded.¹⁹ It appears from Syriac sources that he took this step so that he himself could become Catholicos, but he did not succeed, because his actions were met with abhorrence by the Syrian clergy and people, and he was not elected.²⁰

Armenian sources give interesting information about Barsauma. According to Tovma Artsruni, Barsauma came to Armenia – to Arzanene and Mokka, to sow the seeds of the Nestorian sect there.²¹ The fact that the Armenian ministers were worried and took measures to disrupt Barsauma’s Nestorian preaching in Armenia shows that this preaching probably had some success and caused confusion among the circles of the Armenian Church, otherwise the adoption of any preventive or persecutory measures would not be justified and would even be impossible.²²

The information provided by Tovma Artsruni leads to the conclusion that probably because of facing strong opposition from the Armenian ministers for actively spreading the Nestorian schism, Barsauma slandered them in front of King Peroz and caused a lot of bloodshed because he presented the Armenian ministers and the Catholicos as rebels in front of the Persian king as if they wanted to become subjects of the Greek king.²³

The information in “The Book of Letters”²⁴ shows, among other facts, that the Armenian Church rejected any communication with the Nestorians and their faith and denounced the Nestorians.

¹⁷ Macomber 1958: 147; Khorikyan 2017: 113.

¹⁸ Pigulevskaya 1967: 99.

¹⁹ Chabot 1901: 123. See also Labourt 1904: 130.

²⁰ Certainly, attention should be paid to the fact that Babua was formerly a Zoroastrian, which caused displeasure at the Persian court, and he even spent two years in prison before his death.

²¹ Thovma Artsruni and Ananun 1985: 130. The Syrian historian Grigor Barhebreos also notes that Barsauma came to Armenia, the only difference is that according to him Barsauma was about to enter Armenia when he received a threatening letter from the Armenian ministers demanding that he renounce his intentions (see Ter-Minasyants 2009: 72; Ter-Minasyan 1971a: 348-349). Anyway, his advance in Armenia was prohibited (see Leo 1947: 110).

²² Ter-Minasyan 1971a: 349.

²³ See in detail Ter-Minasyan 1971a: 349-351.

²⁴ Book of Letters 1901: 41-46.

Bishop of Edessa Ibas's disciple Barsauma, who was the propagator of the ideas of Theodore of Mopsuestia, had a special place in doctrinal disputes as well. The interpretation of the Holy Scriptures was the basis of the teaching of the medieval church school, therefore, the question of who and how interpreted the biblical texts, what views the teachers of Edessa and Mtsbin schools held, was important.

Barsauma's activity was significant not only for the history of the Mtsbin Academy. He occupied a unique place among the figures of the Syriac Church as a bishop, too.

The Shah of Iran involved Barsauma in the border negotiations with Byzantium,²⁵ but at the same time he was supervised by Marzpan Kardak by order of the Shah.²⁶

As a bishop, Barsauma occupied a significant place and adhered to Nestorianism. While Catholicoi Babu and Akakios considered marriage incompatible with the rank of bishop, Barsauma had his own special approach to celibacy and "like all the Persians, he was married".²⁷ The Monophysites, whose stronghold was the monasteries, considered Barsauma an opponent both in terms of doctrinal teaching and church rules.

The struggle between the Monophysites and Nestorians in the late 5th century and the first half of the 6th century led to the division of the Syriac church into two branches, each of which developed its own views and beliefs. However, these doctrinal differences did not prevent the development of Syriac culture. The struggle between these two directions of Christianity, the so-called missionary expansion, was not only doctrinal, but also was an unrelenting struggle for territorial expansion and for gaining new followers. For example, the Nestorians struggled to weaken the strong influence of Monophysitism among the Arab tribes.²⁸

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adontz N. 2006. Mashtots and his Pupils according to Foreign Sources. Studies, vol.2, Yerevan, 7-34 (In Arm.).

Atiya S. A. 1968. A History of Eastern Christianity, London.

Ayvazyan K.V. 1976. «The History of Taron» and Armenian Literature of the IV-VII centuries (Historical-philological study). Yerevan (In Arm.).

Baum W., D. W. Winkler 2003 (eds.). The Church of the East: A Concise History. London, New York.

Book 1901. Book of Letters. Tiflis (In Arm.).

Chabot J.-B. 1901. Chronique de Michel le Syrien (ed. J.-B. Chabot). T. II, Paris.

Chabot J. B. 1902. Synodicon Orientale, Paris.

Dorfman-Lazarev L.I. 2004. Syriac Christian culture and the Origins of Miaphysite Churches, *Lraber hasarakakan gitutyunneri* 2, 84-92 (In Arm.)

²⁵ Chabot 1902: 529; Pigulevskaya 1979: 201.

²⁶ Chabot 1902: 526-529.

²⁷ Pigulevskaya 1979: 201.

²⁸ Pigulevskaya 1964: 274; Dorfman-Lazarev 2004: 86.

Khorikyan H. 2017, Formation of the Christian Church of Iran in the V century, in «Armenia and Oriental Christian Civilisation II»: International conference dedicated to the 90th birthday of Armenologist-Byzantinologist Karen Yuzbashyan (1927-2009)(December 7-8, 2017), Reports and theses. Yerevan, 107-113 (In Arm.)

Labourt J. 1904. Le Christianisme dans l'empire Perse sous la dynastie Sassanide (224-632), Paris.

Leo 1947. History of Armenia, vol.II. Yerevan (In Arm.).

Macomber W. F. 1958. The Christology of the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, A. D. 486, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* (Roma), №. XXIV (I-II), 142-154.

Melkonyan H.G. 1976. Syriac Sources, vol.1 (translation from the original, preface and commentaries by H.G.Melkonyan). Yerevan (In Arm.).

Mingana A. 1908. Sources Syriaces. *Mšihā Zkha* (par A. Mingana), Vol. I, Leipzig.

Pigulevskaya N.V. 1979. The Culture of Syriac in the Middle Ages. Moscow (In Russian).

Pigulevskaya N.V. 1967. The History of Nisibis Academy, *Peredneaziatskij sbornik* 17/80, Leningrad, 90-109 (In Russian).

Pigulevskaya N.V. 1964, Arabs on the Borders of Byzantium and Iran in the IV-VI centuries. Moscow-Leningrad (In Russian).

Pigulevskaya N.V. 1956, Cities of Iran in the Early Middle Ages. Moscow-Leningrad (In Russian).

Ter-Minasyan Ye. 1971a. Nestorianism in Armenia, *Historical-philological studies*, Yerevan, 330-393 (In Arm.).

Ter-Minasyan Ye. 1971b. The Date and Place of the Meeting of Catholicos Babgen, *Historical-philological studies*, Yerevan, 31-44 (In Arm.).

Ter-Minasyants Ye. 2009. Relations of Armenian Church with the Syriac Churches (II edition). *Etchmiatsin* (In Arm.).

Ter-Petrosyan L. 1979. Armenians in Medieval Mtsbin and southern provinces of Armenia, *Patmabanasirakan handes* 3, 80-92 (In Arm.).

Thovma Artsruni and Ananun 1985. History of the House of Artsrunik (translation from Classical Armenian and notes by V.Vardanyan). Yerevan (In Arm.).

Translated from Armenian by Syuzanna Chraghyan

The article was delivered on 04.08.2022. reviewed on 14.12.2022, accepted for publication on 16.12.2022.