

East Syriac Theological Instruction and Anti-Chalcedonian Identity in Nisibis in Late Antiquity

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The School of Nisibis was prominent within the East Syriac tradition. Famous among Eastern Christian alma maters, in this learning center students were educated to become clerics and to propagate a theological identity based upon Theodore of Mopsuestia's legacy, as well as an Anti-Chalcedonian Christology. Focused on different sources, this essay will explore some perceptions against Chalcedon from East Syriac personalities linked to Nisibis from Late Antiquity to the Middle Age. The question lying at the heart of this essay is the following: how influential was the School of Nisibis for the patristic dissemination of Theodore of Mopsuestia's theological position, and implicitly for shaping and defining a dogmatic identity against Chalcedon's dogma and terminology?

Keywords: *School of Nisibis, canons, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Chalcedon*

1. Insights into the theological education of the School of Nisibis

The School of Nisibis has become a landmark of education among the Eastern Christians, defining a confessional group, the East Syrians.¹ This was located in a city with ancient Christian roots. According to tradition, the diocese of Nisibis was established around 300 by a bishop named Bābū. Canon 21 of the council held under the Chatolicos Ishaq in 410, recognized the bishop of Nisibis as metropolitan of Arzūn, Qardū, Bēth Zabdai, Bēth Rahīmai and Beth Mwksāyē.² The bishopric of Nisibis came hierarchically after the Bishop of Kaškar (ranked directly after the patriarchal diocese of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and ensuring the interregnum from the death of the Patriarch until the election of another), and the metropolitan of Bēth Lāpāt.³

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¹ Arthur Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 12, Stockholm, Estonian Theological Society in Exile 1962, p. 13.

² Jean Baptiste Chabot, *Synodicon orientale ou recueil de synodes nestoriens*, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale 1902, p. 33 (syr.), p. 272 (fr.).

³ Jean Maurice Fiey, *Pour un Oriens Christianus Novus. Répertoire des diocèses syriaques orientaux et occidentaux*, Beiruter Texte und Studien 49, Beirut – Stuttgart, Franz Steiner 1993, p.

Nisibis represented a border town between the Roman and Persian empires. After the closure of the School of Edessa in the context of the Henotikon of Emperor Zenon in 489,⁴ this theological center of the East Syrians (or the “Nestorians” as they were misnamed within the Christological disputes)⁵ moved to Nisibis, due to the efforts of the brave bishop Barṣaumā⁶ and the eloquence of the great theologian Narsai, and became a representative theological school for the Christian Orient.⁷ Besides its external influence, the institution had an impressive effect inside the East Syriac tradition, so that almost almost all prominent East Syriac Church leaders acquired their intellectual formation in this learning milieu. As Hermann states, we still read in sources how Syrians made their way to Nisibis to sit at the feet of a teacher.⁸

The close relationship in terms of continuity between the School of Edessa and that of Nisibis is most explicitly exposed by the assertion of Barḥadbešabbā ‘Arbaya, Bishop of Ḥolwān (6th century), an alumnus later becoming a teacher at Nisibis, who states in his writing *The Reason for the Establishment of Schools*: “While Edessa grew dim, Nisibis shone forth.”⁹

In order to get a clear picture of the theological training at the School of Nisibis it is necessary to take a look on the “canons” or “statutes” of this institution. These two sources include statements, the so-called “Canons of the Holy School of Nisibis [qānonē d-‘eskulā qadištā

116; see also: J.-M. Fiey, *Nisibe métropole syriaque orientale et ses suffragants des origines à nos jours*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium Subsidia 54, Louvain, Peeters 1977.

⁴ J. B. Chabot, *L'École de Nisibe, son histoire, ses statuts*, lecture faite à la séance générale de la Société Asiatique, le 18 juin 1896, Extrait du Journal Asiatique, Paris 1896, p. 7-8.

⁵ See: Sebastian P. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: a Lamentable Misnomer”, in: Sebastian P. Brock, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy*, Aldershot, Ashgate 2006, p. 1-14; and in: “The Church of the East: Life and Thought”, in: *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78 (3/1996), p. 23-35.

⁶ Stephen Gero, *Barṣaumā of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the Fifth Century*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 426, Subs. 63, Louvain, Peeters 1981, p. 60-73, allocates a chapter to Barṣaumā’s support for the Theological School of Nisibis.

⁷ Francis X.E. Albert, “The School of Nisibis: Its History and Statutes”, in: *Catholic University Bulletin* 12 (1906), p. 160-181, esp. p. 161.

⁸ Theodor Hermann, “Die Schule von Nisibis vom 5. Bis 7. Jahrhundert. Ihre Quellen und ihre Geschichte”, in: *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 25 (1/1926), p. 89-122, esp. p. 89.

⁹ Addai Scher (ed.), *Mār Barḥadbešabbā ‘Arbaya, évêque de Halwan (VI^e siècle), Cause de la fondation des écoles*, Patrologia Orientalis 4.4 [18], Paris, Firmin-Didot 1908, p. 386 [72]: 10-11. For an analysis of this writing of Barḥadbešabbā see: Theresia Hainthaler, “Die verschiedenen Schulen, durch die Gott die Menschen lehren wollte. Bemerkungen zur ost-syrischen Schulbewegung”, in: Martin Tamcke (ed.), *Syriaca II. Beiträge zum 3. deutschen Syrologen-Symposium in Vierzehnheiligen 2002*, Studien zur orientalischen Kirchengeschichte 33, Münster, LIT 2004, p. 175-192.

d-nšībīn mdīntā], divided into: a) “the old statutes” (22 sentences) promulgated in 496 during the time of Narsai, a famous East Syriac teacher¹⁰ and Osea, the East Syriac Metropolitan of the city;¹¹ b) “the new canons” (21 sentences) that were added to the old ones in 590, under the leadership of Metropolitan Šem‘ūn and the directorate of Henānā.¹²

The theological activity was performed, first of all, based on language. Among the teaching staff, the canons mention a scribe [sāprā]¹³ in charge of teaching the students techniques for copying manuscripts.¹⁴ But before becoming familiar with this writing process, the students were involved in reading as well as in exegetical activities as mentioned in the 8th canon, that the “brothers” named “students” should not neglect reading and exegesis.¹⁵ The canon makes clear that these two aspects were fundamental for students [eskulaīe], preparing them for the custom of copying manuscripts—an established practice within the School. In the same tone, the 14th canon tells about a disciplinary action and portrays the interest in old texts and books: the student losing a book which he borrowed, for reading or transcription, from the leader of the house [rabbaitā] (administrator) and not telling the administrator, would be severely punished.¹⁶ This may indicate not only the practice of transcribing texts based on the consciousness of preserving and transmitting the theology, but also the importance of the old text and books

¹⁰ For the life and theological activity of Narsai, see: Joseph Shijo, “Askese und Gelehrsamkeit: Das monastische Leben des Narsai von Nisibis, ein ostsyrisches Beispiel”, in: Dietmar W. Winkler (ed.), *Syrische Studien: Beiträge zum 8. Deutschen Syrologie-Symposium in Salzburg 2014*, Orientalia – Patristica – Oecumenica 10, Wien, LIT 2016, p. 73-79. Karl Pinggéra, “Das Bild Narsais des Großen bei Barḥaddbšabbā ‘Arḥāyā. Zum theologischen Profil der «Geschichte der heiligen Väter»”, in: Arafā Mustafa et al. (eds.), *Inkulturation des Christentums im Sasanidenreich*, Wiesbaden, Ludwig Reichert 2007, p. 245-259. An old material but still fundamental is Anton Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur, mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte*, Bonn, A. Marcus und E. Weber Verlag 1922, p. 109-113.

¹¹ Eberhard Nestle, “Die Statuten der Schule von Nisibis aus den Jahren 496 und 590 nach dem von Guidi herausgegebenen syrischen Text übersetzt”, in: *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 18 (1898), p. 211-229, esp. p. 211-212; A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 266, Subs. 26, Louvain, Peeters 1965, p. 90-93; idem, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 31-33.

¹² E. Nestle, “Die Statuten der Schule”, p. 211-212; A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 34-35; idem, *History of the School*, p. 93-96.

¹³ A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 60; idem, *History of the School*, p. 101.

¹⁴ Michael Maas, Heinrich Kihn, *Exegesis and Empire in the Early Byzantine Mediterranean. Junillus Africanus and the Instituta Regularia Divinae Legis*, Heidelberg – Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck 2003, p. 108.

¹⁵ Canon 8 I, in: E. Nestle, “Die Statuten der Schule”, p. 222; A. Vööbus, *History of the School*, p. 102.

¹⁶ Canon 14 I, in: E. Nestle, “Die Statuten der Schule”, p. 223; A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 81; idem, *History of the School*, p. 102.

as a traditional medium. East Syrians' heightened interest for their textual heritage is also apparent in the 18th canon, which takes attitude against losing something from the School's patrimony, this being as important as the city itself: if the administrator or any student steals the books of the brothers who are no longer part of the students' group will be removed from the School and even from the city,¹⁷ proving that between the school and the city there was an intrinsic relationship, the school influencing the city life itself.

Reading old texts was one of the tasks of the students at Nisibis. Vööbus asserts that this process involved philological and grammatical practices to help students overcome the differences between the common and literary language.¹⁸ Moreover, the statutes made a clear distinction between the reading materials. The students had to rigorously limit themselves to theological books. One might ask, why this limitation to a strictly theological choice? The answer lays in the fact that in the proximity of the School was located a xenodochion, a medical establishment, populated by different medical practitioners studying and living in that area. The 19th canon seems to trace the boundary between the two communities of study: theologians were not allowed to live together with medicine students because of the prohibition of reading theological books together with lay physicians' materials.¹⁹ This limitation was probably based on precedents, in which students began to study medicine at the expense of theology, apparent in the 20th canon: students who left the theological field for medicine did not have the right to attend lectures in the School anymore, except for those who had a good reputation, doctors (practicing in the field) and citizens of the city.²⁰

All these regulations were considered normative for the proper functioning of the educational process. After the attempt to get a clear idea of the theological formation of the students at Nisibis, it makes sense to now take into consideration the staff of the School. The 1st canon refers to the mepašqānā (exegete, interpreter of biblical materials), an office held by someone who also encompassed the role of School director.²¹ Moreover,

¹⁷ E. Nestle, "Die Statuten der Schule", p. 226; A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 79.

¹⁸ See: idem, *History of the School*, p. 102.

¹⁹ Canon 19 II, in: E. Nestle, "Die Statuten der Schule", p. 100. There have been some exceptions of East Syriac theologians who have studied both theology and medicine in Nisibis. One of these is Babai the Great, a theologian and monk who strongly influenced the Syriac Christology in the 7th century, see: Till Engelmann, *Annahme Christi und Gottesschau: Die Theologie Babais des Großen*, Göttinger Orientforschungen: Reihe 1, Syriaca 42, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz 2013, p. 24.

²⁰ Canon 20 II, in: E. Nestle, "Die Statuten der Schule", p. 228.

²¹ Later, when Theodore of Mopsuestia's writings became normative for the theological School of Nisibis, the Antiochian convicted at the 5th Ecumenical Council was awarded this title of "interpret par excellence" [mepašqānā] that will remain forever in the East Syriac

besides its administrative function, this office represented the highest academic position: mepašqānā epitomized the highest authority in the field of exegesis and was an exponent of the normative theology of those times. The 1st canon called this exegetical teacher “exegete of the school and of the whole community”.²² Beyond the profile of Narsai, founder of the school, the presence of the mepašqānā within the School can also be documented on the basis of Abraham of Bēth Rabban (director of the School between 510-569)²³ who according to Barḥaḍbešabbā’s history, excelled in lectures and pedagogical activities, all his abilities stimulating numerous students in the learning process.²⁴ He supported the rewriting activity, an important field in the curriculum of the School. Another concept we find in the 1st canon is rabbaitā. His role was mostly practical, being the right hand of the director, in charge of the managerial activities of the School’s community. The office of rabbaitā was paramount for the entire school, his election being stipulated in this canon as well: the rabbaitā was elected annually, at the meeting of the entire community designed to choose for this function a “firm person” [parš ōpā taqnā].²⁵

If we look at the 20th canon, we understand that not only the mepašqānā was important in the educational process, but also other offices, such as maqreīānē.²⁶ Chabot opines that this term designated the people responsible for liturgical chants. Vööbus, whose opinion seems to be much more correct, defines the maqreīānē as lecturers who introduced students to lexical and grammatical study of Biblical texts.²⁷ The instruction in the School was supported also by eminent students who supervised the reading.

tradition. See: Addai Scher (ed.), *Mār Barḥaḍbešabbā ‘Arbaya, évêque de Halwan (VI^e siècle), Cause de la fondation des écoles*, p. 382 [68]; Gerrit J. Reinink, “Tradition and the Formation of the ‘Nestorian’ Identity in Sixth- to Seventh-Century Iraq”, in: *Church History and Religious Culture* 89 (1-3/2009), p. 217-250, esp. 231, n. 36.

²² Canon 1 I, in: E. Nestle, “Die Statuten der Schule”, p. 220; A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 73-74.

²³ See: F. Nau (ed.), *Barḥaḍbešabbā ‘Arbaya, Le seconde partie de l’histoire ecclésiastique*, PO, IX [5], Paris, 1913, p. 616 f.; A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 134f.

²⁴ Nau (ed.), *Barḥaḍbešabbā ‘Arbaya*, p. 622f.; A. Vööbus, *History of the School*, p. 137.

²⁵ F. Nau (ed.), *Barḥaḍbešabbā ‘Arbaya*, p. 622f.; A. Vööbus, *History of the School*, p. 137.

²⁶ A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 73-74; E. Nestle, “Die Statuten der Schule”, p. 220.

²⁷ A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 73-74; E. Nestle, “Die Statuten der Schule”, p. 220.

¹ B. Chabot, *L’École de Nisibe*, p. 100.

²⁷ A. Vööbus, *History of the School*, p. 100; Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon. A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann’s Lexicon Syriacum*, Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns; Piscataway, New Jersey, Gorgias Press 2009, p. 823 translates the term through “reading instructor”. See also: M. Maas, H. Kihn, *Exegesis and Empire*, p. 108.

The theological elites who held these offices had a perspective on the future of the institution and on their church, so that they cultivated their students to be competitive in the inter-confessional and inter-religious encounters. The preservation of their own tradition was also paramount, and this was done by engagement in rewriting Syriac Patristic materials, translating texts of different Greek Church Fathers into Syriac, and counteracting dogmatic formulas such as Chalcedon and other doctrines different to their traditional faith.

One can understand that the canons contain strict rules, in order to make the students proficient from early age and to equip them with all necessary tools for defining the East Syriac church in their later mission: if lecturers, teachers and tutors in rhetoric would neglect the dispositions of the School without the approval of the rabban (the director) and not because of health issues, they would receive a reprimand and would not be allowed to participate in the trial of their issue.²⁸ This canon, also uses the concept *mehageiānē* that seems to refer to rhetorical teachers,²⁹ or, considering the etymology of the term, it may indicate the tutors, who helped students to achieve good reading skills³⁰ (or as Vööbus mentions, the term is used to “strengthen the foundation of basic knowledge”).³¹ All these official terms make us aware of the importance of teaching activity for the theological education of the students at the School of Nisibis and their familiarization with the reading of biblical text, rewriting the Patristic interpretations and learning rhetorical strategies of debating with Christian opponents. And to get a better overview about this large learning involvement it should be added that not only teachers, but also the most eminent students were part of the teaching staff. Demonstrating their excellence, these apprentice students were appointed to teach in the city.³² The question arises, why did this teaching activity extend from inside the school into the city itself? This was, most probably, in order to produce a powerful effect on this missionary purpose that the East Syriac Church tried to impose in a multi-confessional area such as Nisibis. The students have been educated to share reciprocity, help and familiarity, from living to reading and learning together. Important for the students have been not only the internal environment, but, as specified in the 9th canon, also the act of sharing everything with the world in which they would later be active, from bread to theological culture: “Brethren living

²⁸ Canon 20 I, in: E. Nestle, “Die Statuten der Schule”, p. 223-224; A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 82-83.

²⁹ J. B. Chabot, *L'École de Nisibe*, p. 65; see also: A. Vööbus, *History of the School*, p. 101.

³⁰ A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 83, n. 42.

³¹ A. Vööbus, *History of the School*, p. 100.

³² Canon 7 II, in: E. Nestle, “Die Statuten der Schule”, p. 226.

together do not have to eat the bread for their own sake, but their living must be common as learning".³³ This manner of life was of course part of the missionary program of the East Syriac Church, which in its mission reached also far away Asian territories such as China, enriching the universal Christian heritage of the East. But although students were encouraged to do missions in the city, the School maintained a very clear balance between these two elements, expressed in the semi-monastic³⁴ life of the students who lived in cells and were not allowed to have accommodation in the town of Nisibis. Those who intended to live in the city were no longer admitted into the School.³⁵

2. The starting process of Patristic dissemination and the shaping of an Anti-Chalcedonian position in Nisibis

Syriac was the literary language of this multi-cultural space of Edessa and Nisibis as well as of a good part of Syria.³⁶ The start of a Patristic dissemination among Syrians had its beginning in Edessa, in 363, and continued in Nisibis. An initiator of Greek translations into Syriac was, for certain, Qiyōrē, head of the School of Edessa between 373 and 437. According to Barḥaḍbešabbā, the theological materials for students' preparation at Edessa were the writings of Ephraem the Syrian (306-373), but during Qiyōrē's time were replaced by the commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia,³⁷ accessible by a translation process started in Edessa. Narsai belonged to the first generation of students from Edessa who studied the work of Theodore of Mopuestia in Syriac, and one of the representatives of this Persian school exiled now in Nisibi.³⁸ The emphasis placed on read-

³³ Canon 9 II, in: *Ibidem*, p. 226.

³⁴ Adam H. Becker also states the semi-monastic context at the Nisibis School: Adam H. Becker, "Bringing the Heavenly Academy Down to Earth: Approaches to the Imagery of Divine Pedagogy in the East Syrian Tradition", in: Raanan S. Boustani, Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 174-191, esp. p. 174.

³⁵ Canon 2 II, in: E. Nestle, "Die Statuten der Schule", p. 225.

³⁶ See: Sebastian P. Brock, David G. K. Taylor (eds.), *The Hidden Pearl. The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Ancient Aramaic Heritage*, Roma, Trans World Film 2001; S. P. Brock, "Three Thousand Years of Aramaic Literature", in: *ARAM* 1 (1989), p. 11-23; idem, "Syriac Culture in the Seventh Century", in: *ARAM* 1 (2/1989), p. 268-280, esp. p. 268; idem, "Syriac Culture in the Seventh Century", in: *ARAM* 1 (2/1989), p. 268-280, esp. p. 268.

³⁷ Addai Scher (ed.), *Mār Barḥaḍbešabbā 'Arbaya*, p. 382-383 [68-69].

³⁸ A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 2006, p. 124; see also: Frederick McLeod, "Narsai's Dependence on Theodore of Mopsestia", in: *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 7 (2007), p. 18-38.

ing materials and on the theological formation at the School of Nisibis, in strict accordance with a tradition becoming more and more particular, have prepared the introduction of Theodore as a constitutive element to the East Syrian tradition, and in the long run, the shaping of an anti-Chalcedonian attitude.

After Theodore's translation into Syriac, we can talk about his legacy in the Church of the East. Adam Becker sees a positive aspect in the translation process of Theodore's work into Syriac: we should emphasize not only the situation that the East Syriac ("Nestorian") Church becomes now dependent on Theodorian thought, but also the activity and creativity of this Church in this reception process. Becker goes on to assert that through Theodore's transfer from his original Greek context to the Syriac culture of Nisibis, his thought evolved in new and creative directions on the basis of an East Syriac "school movement".³⁹ The tendency is visible, if we look at some sources: a concrete case is Narsai's homily on the three Nestorian doctors, written most probably in 485-490,⁴⁰ in which the author praises the Antiochian church actor, but no word about what happened in 451 in Chalcedon.

Not only Narsai was involved in the reform and renaissance of a theological identity in Nisibis. The literary productivity and the promotion of the patristic tradition continued also after the death of Narsai, whose direct successor in the School's directorate, Eliša, was very active on the exegetical level. Barḥadbešabbā attributes to Eliša commentaries on various Old Testament books in Syriac, introductions which probably helped the School in its learning process, enriching the literary and patristic tradition [mašlmānūtā] from Nisibis. The translation and rewriting process was generated on one side by the desire to deepen and develop the theological field, and to extend the Syriac patristic heritage and on the other side by the necessity of creating defending tools for the East Syriac faith in debates with the West-Syrians ("Jacobites") or with Chalcedonians. In this sense, the Chronicle of Seert states that Eliša was prolific not only in the field of biblical exegesis, but also in the Patristic reconstructions, completing on request, a work of Theodore

³⁹ A. H. Becker, *Fear of God*, p. 125. For the dissemination of theological schools in the Syriac space, see also: Jérôme Labourt, *Le christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie sassanide (224-632)*, Bibliothèque de l'enseignement de l'histoire ecclésiastique 11, V, Paris, Lecoivre 1904, p. 288-301; Robert Macina, "L'homme à l'école de Dieu. D'Antioche à Nisibis: Profil herméneutique, théologique et kérugmatique du mouvement scolastique nestorien", in: *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 32 (1982), p. 87-124, 263-301; 33 (1983), p. 39-103.

⁴⁰ See Jérôme Labourt, *Le christianisme*, p. 264, n. 1; Luise Abramowski, "Das Konzil von Chalkedon in der Homilie des Narses über die drei nestorianischen Lehrer", in: *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 66 (1954-1955), p. 140-143, esp. p. 140.

of Mopsuestia (a Commentary on the books of Samuel).⁴¹ The learning practice of the School seems to have taken place on several levels: the staff was involved in teaching and guiding the students, as well as in the work of translating the fathers and rewriting the Patristic interpretations. All these were part of the didactic process as is the case of Abraham of Bēth Rabban, who found that students had some difficulties in working with the Syriac version of Theodore of Mopsuestia's exegetic texts, so that he rewrote the translation by making it accessible for the teaching activity.⁴² What becomes clear here is that this process was permanent, because once translated, the exegetical texts were applied in the teaching activity of the school, generating permanent new rewritings by motivated students and teachers.⁴³

It is interesting to note that the resonance of this school and his teaching was well known to the Byzantines. According to the Ecclesiastical History of Barḥaḍbešabbā 'Arbaya, the emperor Justinian invited Abraham of Bēth Rabban, to come to Constantinople and to present a defence of his theological vantage point. Already old, the head of the school declined the invitation, and sent a doctrinal letter to the emperor.⁴⁴ Before this time, we do not possess clear indications in the sources about the school's position regarding Chalcedon and its reception in Nisibis. However, subsequently some clues appear.

The interest in the tradition of the church fathers and especially in Theodore of Mopsuestia's works caused Mār Abā, a scholar at Nisibis⁴⁵ who became Catholicos-Patriarch of the East Syriac Church in 540,⁴⁶ to travel to Byzantium to gather the writings of this Antiochian church father. Mār Abā was one of the numerous theological personalities involved in the process of translation and rewriting the Patristic exegesis; it seems that he translated the Old Testament from Greek into Syriac, according to the catalogue of 'Abdīšō⁴⁷ and the

⁴¹ A. Scher (ed.), *Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, seconde partie (I), PO 7.2 [32] Turnhout, Brepols 1909, p. 127 [35]. A. Vööbus, *History of the School*, p. 125.

⁴² F. Nau (ed.), *Barḥaḍbešabbā 'Arbaya*, p. 622; See also: A. Vööbus, *History of the School*, p. 137-138; idem, "Abraham de-Bet Rabban and His Rôle in the Hermeneutic Traditions of the School of Nisibis", in: *Harvard Theological Review* 58 (2/1965), p. 203-214.

⁴³ Canon 14 also refers to this fact: E. Nestle, "Die Statuten der Schule", p. 223; A. Vööbus, *History of the School*, p. 102. See also: M. Maas, H. Kihn, *Exegesis and Empire*, p. 108.

⁴⁴ F. Nau (ed.), *Barḥaḍbešabbā 'Arbaya*, p. 628-630; see also A.D. Lee, "Evagrius, Paul of Nisibis and the Problem of Loyalties in the Mid-Sixth Century", in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 44: 4 (10/1993), p. 569-585, esp. 576.

⁴⁵ A. Scher (ed.), *Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, seconde partie (II), [63] 155.

⁴⁶ For Mār Abā, see: A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, p. 119-120.

⁴⁷ 'Abdīšō', "Catalogus Librorum", in: J.S. Asemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, III. 1, Romae, Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide 1725, p. 75.

Chronicle of Se'ert.⁴⁸ Mār Abā had undertaken with Thomas of Edessa,⁴⁹ his apprentice, proficient in Greek, a trip to Alexandria, Constantinople, Athens, Corinth and Antioch to collect the works of Theodore and translate them later into Syriac, their reputation reaching also the ears of the Byzantine emperor Justinian.⁵⁰ Mār Abā seems to be the first East Syrian who mentions, among other councils, Chalcedon, as a source for his collection of canons: in the prologue of the acts of the council held in 544⁵¹ we read:

(Some of) these canons are from the synod of the three hundred and eighteen fathers who gathered at Nicaea, and others are from the synod which was at Ancyra in Galatia, which is in Caesarea of Cappadocia; others are from the synod which was in Neocaesarea, others from the synod which was in Gangra, others from the synod which was in Antioch at the dedication of the church, *others from the synod of five hundred and sixty seven bishops who gathered in Chalcedon* [ū-ahrānē mēn d-sunhados d-hammēšmā ū-štin ū-šab ā episkope d-b-kalqidunā etkannaš], others from the synod of the East which was in Seleucia and Ctesiphon in the days of Mar Ishaq the catholicos, and others from [the synod] of the holy Mār 'Abā'.⁵²

Labourt asserts that this mention is suspect (verdächtig).⁵³ I assume that Wilhelm de Vries' assessment is much more plausible, considering that Labourt's opinion is not justified, because this is not the only mention of Chalcedon in 'Abdšō's collection, but appears once again.⁵⁴ Another reason for this adoption in Mār Abā's text is that, as already mentioned, he travelled to

⁴⁸ A. Scher (ed.), *Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, seconde partie (I), p. 158 [66]; see also: A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School*, p. 167.

⁴⁹ For Thomas of Edessa, see: A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, p. 121-122.

⁵⁰ A. Scher (ed.), *Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, seconde partie (I), 155-156, [63-64]; T. Hainthaler, "Thomas of Edessa, Causa de Nativitate: Some Considerations", in: *Parole de l'Orient* 31 (2006), p. 63-85, here p. 68; Paul Bedjan (ed.), *Histoire de Mar Iabalaha et de trois autres patriarches*, Paris – Leipzig, Harrassowitz 1895, p. 218-219; see also: Nina Pigulevskaya, "Mar Aba I. Une page de l'histoire de la civilisation au VI^e siècle de l'ère nouvelle", in: *Mélanges d'Orientalisme offerts à Henri Massé, Impr. de l'université, Téhéran*, 1963, p. 327-336, esp. p. 329.

⁵¹ For the council see: Dietmar W. Winkler, *Ostsyrisches Christentum: Untersuchungen zu Christologie, Ekklesiologie und zu den ökumenischen Beziehungen der Assyrischen Kirche des Ostens*, Studien zur orientalischen Kirchengeschichte 26, Münster, LIT 2003, p. 35-38.

⁵² J.B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, p. 545: 15-16 (syr.), p. 556 (fr.).

⁵³ Jérôme Labourt, *Le christianisme*, p. 187, n. 2.

⁵⁴ See Wilhelm de Vries, "Die syrisch-nestorianische Haltung zu Chalkedon", in: Alois Grillmeier, Heinrich Bacht (eds.), *Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Würzburg, Echter Verlag 1951, p. 603-635, esp. p. 608.

Byzantium and came into contact with the church hierarchy from that area: even though his dogmatic position was strictly in line with the East Syriac teaching, when he composed the canons, he seemed to be open for accepting moral aspects and other issues regarding church organization, but not dogmatic terms. An example in this sense is the 12th canon of the council of Mār Abā, which coincides with the 27th canon of Chalcedon.⁵⁵

Moreover, not only the council led by Patriarch Mār Abā adopted canonical influences from Chalcedon, but also that led by his successor, Mār Joseph I in 554. Mār Joseph was also trained in the spiritual region of Nisibis. After acquiring knowledge of Western medicine, he entered the monastery of Nisibis where he was appointed as physician of the Persian king, Chosrau I. After the death of Mār Abā he was elected Patriarch-Catholicos in 552 and dismissed, most probably in the year 567.⁵⁶ The fifth canon of Mār Joseph's council coincides with the same one of Chalcedon:

It was reported in the council of bishops in the paternal synod of 30 the West that anathema was placed upon a bishop who migrates from see to see [...]; we have decreed by heavenly authority that no one is allowed to give way to migrating from see to see. Even though one may be greatly pressed by insiders and outsiders, he should not accept their petition, but should hold fast to the keeping of the canons [...].⁵⁷

If some canons from Chalcedon focused on measures keeping the Church's life in good order penetrated the East Syriac literature, in terms of dogma it is clear that they excluded any form of influence from Byzantium. Such positions become more transient starting with Mār Paulus, the metropolitan of Nisibis,⁵⁸ a disciple⁵⁹ of Mār Abā, who attended the council of Joseph in 554. According to the Chronicle he led a delegation of Persian bishops to

⁵⁵ J.B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, p. 547 (syr.), p. 557 (fr.): "Concerning those [who take women by] violence in the name of marriage, or are [aiders] and abettors of the violent, the holy synod commanded that if they are clergy, [they should be] completely [cast out] of the Church".

⁵⁶ Mari: Henricus Gismondi (ed., tr.), *Maris Amri et Slibae, De patriarchis nestorianorum commentaria*, pars prior, Rome, C. de Luigi 1899, p. 170 a-b (Arabic.), p. 46 (Latin); Sliwa: *Ibidem*, pars altera, 1896, p. 41 (Arabic), p. 24 (Latin); Oscar Braun, *Das Buch der Synhados oder Synodicon Orientale: Die Sammlung der Nestorianischen Konzilien, zusammengestellt im neunten Jahrhundert nach der syrischen Handschrift, Museo Borgiano 82, der Vatikanischen Bibliothek*, Stuttgart – Wien, Rothsche Verlagshandlung 1900, p. 145.

⁵⁷ J.B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, p. 100 (syr.), p. 357-358 (fr.).

⁵⁸ See A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, p. 120-121 ; J.-M. Fiey, *Saints Syriacques*, Princeton, N.J., The Darwin Press Inc. 2004, p. 338.

⁵⁹ A. Scher (ed.), *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)*, seconde partie (II), p. [79] 171.

Justinian. For three days, these Persian clerics engaged in debate with Chalcedonian actors in the Byzantine capital.⁶⁰ It is not very clear when this travel took place, in 546-547, 560 or even 561-562.⁶¹ Mār Paulus seems to be the author of a dialogue with Justinian (*Debate with Caesar* [d-rešā d-luqbal qasar])⁶² during his presence in Constantinople, in which he defends his East Syriac doctrine in contradiction with the Byzantine Christological formula. Paulus of Nisibis is mentioned in the Chronicle of Seert for the second time, as an example of a brave Syrian who confronted Justinian during that delegation. The passage from the Chronicle follows the description of the meeting between Išo‘jahb II and Heraclius and is attributed to Baršāumā, Bishop of Shush. Baršāumā accused the Catholicos-Patriarch Išo‘jahb II of betraying his own tradition by communing with the Byzantines. He reproached the East Syriac church leader for accepting the definition of Mary as Mother of God, abandoning the Creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople and even following the council of Chalcedon⁶³, by omitting Diodore, Theodore and Nestorius in the statement with Heraclius. Bishop of Shush alludes in his writing of the case of Paul of Nisibis who confessed his faith before Justinian, responding to the Byzantine emperor that: “Christ has two kyānē and two qnōmē; this is the doctrine of my fathers, my doctors, my predecessors and my guides, the 318”.⁶⁴

Another important theologian who studied in Nisibis, heavily influencing the East Syriac dogmatic formula was Mār Babai the Great. Before entering the Monastery on the Mount Izla, Babai the Great studied at the School of Nisibis under Abraham of Bēth Rabban.⁶⁵ Babai made a considerable contribution to the Christological statement of 612.⁶⁶ In the context of

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. [95] 187.

⁶¹ See J.-M. Fiey, *Nisibe, métropole syriaque orientale et ses suffragants des origines à nos jours*, 52; L. Sako, *Le Role de la hierarchie syriaque orientale dans les rapports diplomatiques entre la Perse et Byzance mix Ve-VIIe siècles*, Paris, 1986, p. 93-94.

⁶² Only an excerpt from this text survives, see: Antoine Guillaumont, “Justinien et L’Église de Perse”, in : *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 23/24 (1969/1970), p. 39-66, French transl. p. 62-66; Syriac text in the appendix of Guillaumont’s article.

⁶³ A. Scher (ed.), *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)*, seconde partie (II), p. 564 [244],

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 568 [248].

⁶⁵ For Babai’s life see also: Thomas of Marga, in: E. A. Wallis Budge (ed.), *Book of Governors*, London, Kaegan Paul 1893, vol. 2. p. 46; Till Engelman, in: Martin Tamcke (ed.), *Annahme Christi und Gottesschau. Die Theologie Babais des Großen*, Göttinger Orientforschungen I. Reihe: Syriaca, vol. 42, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz 2013, p. 27-33.

⁶⁶ See Luise Abramowski, “Die Christologie Babais des Grossen”, in: Ignatius Ortiz de Urbina (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum, 1972: célébré dans les jours 26-31 octobre 1972 à l’Institut Pontifical Oriental de Rome*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 197, Rome, Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum 1974, p. 219-244, esp. p. 222.

the crisis of Henana of Adiabene, the director of the School of Nisibis (571–610), whose teaching was allegedly close to Byzantine theology, became the most fervent critic of Henana. One of Babai's most important writing is the treatise *Liber de Unione* (*On the Union [of the Incarnate Word]*) addressed against Henana, in which the author extensively uses the Syriac formula that Christ is two kyānē and two qnōmē in a paršōpā of sonship (“Christum, qui est duae naturae et duae [qnomae] in una persona filiationis [mšihā d-aitūhi trēn kyanē ū-trēn qnomē b-had paršōpā d-barutā]”).⁶⁷ From Babai's criticism it is clear that the dogma of Chalcedon is strictly rejected by him, but nonetheless he does not name this council in his treatise.

Another East Syriac theologian educated at the School of Nisibis, and the first Catholicos-Patriarch during Islam who directly criticized Chalcedon was ʾĪšōʾjahb III (650–658/659)⁶⁸ who offered a first isolated reaction against Chalcedon. In his 9th letter, he seems to have heard about the agitation (perturbation) of Chalcedon [d-kalqidunā zu ʾzā ʾā], which according to the East Syriac Catholicos, through its concept of the Hypostatic union [hdānāiūt qnomā] leads to the corruption of the true faith [ma ʾla l-hubāla d-haimānutā šarirtā] which the East Syrians acknowledge by the unity in a prosopon of the filiation.⁶⁹ ʾĪšōʾjahb's dogmatic vantage point confirms again the most cultivated East Syriac Christological formula already known from Babai: two kyānē and two qnōmē in a paršōpā of sonship.

However, the clearest position of an East Syriac representative of the Church of Nisibis vis-à-vis Chalcedon is seen several centuries later, at the beginning of Syriac renaissance, namely in *the Demonstration of the rightness of the faith* (*Kitāb al-burhān ʾalā šaḥīḥ al-īmān*), a treatise written in Arabic

⁶⁷ Babai Magni, in: Arthur Adolphe Vaschalde (ed.), *Liber de Unione*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, p. 79-80, Syr. p. 34-35, Louvain, 1915, p. 283: 4-5 (syr.), p. 228 (lat.). According to Babai, kyānā is “the abstract general nature (φύσις, physis) that contains everything common to the same species, and [...] can not exist on its own”. Qnōmā is the “manifestation” of the more abstract kyānā. It is the individual substance, indivisible and unchangeable. Paršōpā represents the sum of all properties of a qnōmā, and is communicable, given and accepted. See: D. W. Winkler, *Ostsyrisches Christentum*, p. 91-92; T. Engelman, *Annahme Christi und Gottesschau*, p. 127; Geevarghese Chediath, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great*, Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India 49, Kottayam, Kerala, Oriental Institute of Religious Studies 1982, p. 86-91.

⁶⁸ For ʾĪšōʾjahb III.' biography see A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, p. 197, §30f.; J.-M. Fiey, “ʾĪšōʾyaw le Grand. Vie du catholicos nestorien ʾĪšōʾyaw III d'Adiabène (580-659), (Introduction)”, in: *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 35 (1969), p. 305-333, esp. p. 305.; J.-M. Fiey, “ʾĪšōʾyaw le Grand. Vie du catholicos nestorien ʾĪšōʾyaw III d'Adiabène (580-659), (Suite)”, in: *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 36 (1970), p. 5-46, esp. p. 5.

⁶⁹ Rubens Duval (ed.), *ʾĪšōʾjahb Patriarchae III Liber epistularum*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Syri, Versio Series Secunda, Tomus LXIV2, Paris, 1904/1905, p. 142: 15-18 (syr.), p. 106 (lat.).

by Elijah, the East Syriac Metropolitan of Nisibis (975-1049). The author is faithful to his tradition attacking with conventional arguments of his church the doctrine's errors of the Byzantines. Defending Nestorius and his cause in the context of the third ecumenical council of Ephesus, Elijah firmly and without any hesitation rejects the council of Chalcedon. He claims that his church, which preserves the right faith, did not need this council:

Our people, the Orientals, neither came nor took part in this council, nor needed it. They taught that the view put forward by the emperor was reprehensible and corrupt, that he was not in the truth, and they held fast to their old orthodox faith, in which nothing was changed, and which did not lead to any violence; for which there was no mediation; no donation of gifts happened, and no expenditure of money took place; that is the faith of the gospel [...].⁷⁰

Chalcedon represented the moment in which his church ended any communication with the Church of Byzantium.⁷¹ The imperial attitudes during the council or the influence of the Byzantine emperor in the church decisions have caused, from his vantage point, tensions between the Christian churches. The Council of Chalcedon, the rejection of Nestorius and the concept of "theotókos" which Elijah sees as false,⁷² makes him reject any idea associated with these. Chalcedon is an example that the Byzantine Church went on a wrong path following the emperor's position, as Elijah makes his point.⁷³ Linked to this idea, Elijah names them "Melkites", which means "those who follow the emperor in terms of dogma"; the concept derives from the Syriac "malkā" ("king"), adopted then also in Arabic ("malakī"). In contrast, opines Elijah, his church was not dependent on political support, a subjective opinion demonstrating that the East Syriac authors, especially during the Syriac Renaissance, were trying with every argument, even with the distortion of the history, to counterattack the Byzantine dogma.

3. Conclusion

It might be concluded that the School of Nisibis represented a learning center, unique in the Christian East, from which an important process of Syriac Patristic dissemination started, focused on Theodore of Mopsuestia's legacy, towards an Anti-Chalcedonian identity. If the School of Edessa can

⁷⁰ Louis Horst (ed.), *Des Metropoliten Elias von Nisibis Buch vom Beweis der Wahrheit des Glaubens*, Colmar, Eugen Barth 1886, p. 39.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 58-59.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

be considered the cradle of Syriac theological literature under the influence of Ephraem the Syrian, then the School of Nisibis represented the culmination of a Christian tradition in the light of Theodore of Mopsuestia's literary influence. Here, students became teachers, bishops, patriarchs, writers and apologists preparing themselves to counteract any theological position differing from the East Syriac dogmatic identity. Whether we are talking about late antiquity's clerics such as Paul of Nisibis, ʾĪšōʾjahb I and ʾĪšōʾjahb III, or about Middle Age's ecclesiastic actors and writers such as Elijah of Nisibis, it can be asserted that the dogmatic identity formed in the East Syriac Church and strengthened in Nisibis more than anywhere else, was without any doubt Anti-Chalcedonian.