

Persecuting Heresy in Early Islamic Iraq: The Catholicos Ishoyahb III and the Elites of Nisibis

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In the wake of the Islamic conquest, the various religious groups of Iraq were unmoored from the Sasanian court that had bound them together and largely left to their own devices. The interval between the collapse of Sasanian state infrastructure and the establishment of regular Muslim surveillance and taxation was a tumultuous period of transition for East Syrian Christians. Previous studies have emphasized the institutional continuities of the Church of the East as a ‘religious community’ – in the Islamicists’ definition of the term as a group with a distinctive religious identity, hierarchy, and legal structures – between the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods. If, however, we remove our lens from the institutional continuities of a supposed religious community and focus rather on the processes by which those institutions were preserved and remade, a fuller picture of the impact of the Islamic conquest on East Syrian Christian society may emerge.

The Syriac correspondence of Ishoyahb, the Catholicos of the Church of the East between 650 and 658, returns us to this tumultuous period and reveals the strategies devised by the titular head of East Syrian Christians to manage the transition from Sasanian to Islamic rule. What emerges from his letters is that the Islamic conquest occasioned a renegotiation of power between ecclesiastical and lay elites. Lay notables had acted as the foremost representatives of East Syrian Christians at the court of the shahanshah. By removing the privileges of the court, the Islamic conquest deeply upset the balance of power between lay elites and the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Two letters in particular reveal this situation in the city of Nisibis: one letter is addressed to the clergy of the city, another to its lay elites (*rawrbane*, magnates). The two letters exhort Nisibis’ ecclesiastical and lay elites to cooperate in expelling Monophysite heretics from the city. The letters thus provide contemporary evidence to support later hagiographical accounts of sectarian violence between rival Christian groups in the immediate post-conquest period. What is more telling, however, is the language Ishoyahb deployed to persuade Nisibis’ twin poles of authority to undertake the expulsion. He suggested that the ‘honor’ of both the laymen and the ecclesiastics was dependent on their orthodoxy in an attempt to construct doctrinal unity out of the Nisibenes who had long been famous for theological fence-sitting. The persecution of heretics under the banner of orthodoxy was to be an exercise in community-building. Ishoyahb outlined a new model of community in which lay elites and ecclesiastics, united against heresy, were to share power, while being subject to the ultimate authority of the Catholicos. The letters provide a glimpse of one bishop’s efforts to take advantage of a lull in state power to magnify the authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in East Syrian Christian society.