
Timothy I of Baghdad, Catholicos of the East Syrian Church, 780–823: Still a Valuable Model

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Timothy I of Baghdad often remains an unknown figure in church history, yet during his time the East Syrian (Nestorian) Church was the most widely spread in the world, spanning from Cyprus to China. Its remarkable growth and tenacity occurred after 451, the year Nestorianism was outlawed as heresy in the Roman Empire. In every country it reached, the East Syrian Church pursued its missionary task as a minority religion without governmental establishment. One of its early missionaries in China, A-lo-pen, received attention from the emperor T'ai-tsung (625–49), who was interested in many religions; the ruler had Syriac Christian tracts translated into Chinese and kept them in the imperial library. His favor, however, amounted to no more than initial assistance.¹ Yet in the eighth century, because East Syrians in Persia had neither been a constant irritant to Muslims nor been a part of the established Christian religion under the Byzantines, Timothy was able to persuade the caliph to allow him to repair churches and to send church planters to former “Christian” lands then under Muslim rule.

Most of us have never heard of Timothy I, for standard church history courses do not tell the story of his church. I had never heard of him, even though I was a history major in college and seminary. Even my Ph.D. studies in church history at Yale did not uncover him. He has, however, been mentioned in world mission histories and now appears in some histories of world Christianity. He seems to be of significance in various Christian curricula in India and China.²

Timothy came to the capital city of Baghdad as the primary leader of the East Syrian Church less than two decades after the city had become the seat of the Muslim Abbasid dynasty in 762.³ A previous catholicos had moved the East Syrian Church's patriarchate there from its earlier location in Seleucia-Ctesiphon because it seemed best to keep a close eye on the Abbasid court. Influential Christian physicians already served that royal household. When Timothy died in 823, Baghdad was not only the political capital of a vast Muslim empire but also a noted center for education, particularly in mathematics, and famous for producing a type of paper that was better than any the Chinese made.

Training and Church Offices

At the end of the fourth century, the Mediterranean may have been home to as many as thirty-four million Christians. But by the end of the eighth century, as a result of the Muslim conquests, Mediterranean Christianity may have shrunk to fewer than ten million persons with the loss of communities from Turkey around Palestine through North Africa to Spain. The East Syrian Church, however, by the late eighth century had planted congregations in Syria, Palestine, Asia Minor, Cyprus, and Egypt because the Byzantine laws against them were no longer in force following the Muslim conquest.⁴ Indeed, Muslims treated the East Syrian

churches relatively well because they knew that the East Syrians were long-standing opponents of their Byzantine enemies. Christians east of Antioch stretched all the way to China and probably numbered more than ten million, most of them members of the East Syrian Church under the catholicos in Baghdad.⁵

Timothy was a good fit for the cosmopolitan city. Born into a wealthy Christian family, he was sent by his uncle George, a bishop, for initial schooling in the Bible to the revered Rabban Mar Abraham the Expositor. Under him he learned the interpretive skills of leaders like Diodore of Tarsus (d. ca. 390) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. ca. 428). Later Timothy was introduced to Greek philosophy, more hermeneutics as well as theology, and probably some medicine at the “mother of patriarchs and bishops,”⁶ the famous Adiabene monastery Bet Abe (south of Mosul, Iraq). His studies there were pursued not only in his native tongue, Syriac, but also in Greek, as he mastered certain Greek classics and a number of Greek Christian writers. Furthermore, the monks responsible for his instruction saw to it that he acquired some fluency in Persian and Arabic. He knew much about Greek logic, as did many East Syrian Church leaders. His translation of Aristotle's *Topics* into Arabic was considered superior work by one caliph.⁷ Timothy notes that he spent much energy and money getting a correct copy of Origen's *Hexapla* so that he could have an accurate Old Testament text.⁸

George taught Timothy the skills necessary for leadership and helped him get elected to the bishopric at Bet Bagāsh not far west of the river Zab (southeastern Turkey) when George retired from that position. Thus with family assistance Timothy became a bishop of an influential church. When the Baghdad patriarchate came open, Timothy had been a bishop for eight years. Besides his outstanding education and his uncle's mentoring, he also knew how to play the ecclesiastical game. At the time of the election, he had heavy bags brought in, hinting that they were filled with gold. As Timothy had anticipated, certain bishops accustomed to simony voted for him in order to collect. To their surprise, the bags turned out to be full of stones.⁹ Not surprisingly, the disappointed bishops formed a party that for some time contested his election. His supporters dismissed Timothy's fraud as no worse than tricks the biblical Jacob had pulled.

Long before Timothy's era, Persian Christians had suffered miserably during the reign of Constantine, who had written the shah a letter urging the Persian government to protect the Christians. Since Constantine had been at war with the Persians, their leaders saw Christians as traitors to the interests of their country. The persecution was remarkably vicious. When Timothy I became catholicos in 780, however, Byzantium was too weak to pose a threat, Persian Muslims had defeated the Zoroastrians, and the Christian minority was prospering. In a letter to a bishop in western Syria, Timothy praised the situation of nearly all Christians in his care because they were not politically preferred and were anything but established. Among them the great pearl of the faith had not been trampled in the mud as it had been in the West by first one emperor and then another, demanding the acceptance of what the ruler believed.¹⁰ The faith of the East Syrian Church had special authenticity because political leaders outside the communities, who sometimes dangled power before

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them or threatened them with persecution, had not greatly influenced them. Timothy was worried about the political involvement of the Abbasid government in the selection of bishops and worked diligently to create proper canon law for those elections and other problems. What every Christian needed to do was follow the Fathers, who “suffered every danger for us so that we might receive their faith, their lived virtues, their customs and their manner of reasoning.”¹¹

International Mission Promoter

Timothy viewed his oversight of churches from the eastern Mediterranean to China as a remarkable opportunity for mission to non-Christians. More than any catholicos before or after him, he persuaded the East Syrian monastic schools of Persia to train missionary monks. As he did, they learned Scripture, philosophy, theology, and medicine in Syriac, Greek, Arabic, and Persian. With that educational background, they were prepared to tackle other tongues and translate the Bible and important liturgical or theological texts into the heart language and the culture of the people whom they served. Under Timothy’s leadership highly trained missionaries left Baghdad overland across the northern and southern silk routes, as well as by sea to India and China from the port of what is now Basra.¹²

The catholicos also sent leaders southeast to the capital of Yemen in order to revitalize the church there.¹³ He reported that

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in what is now western Turkmenistan the khan of certain western Turks and nearly all his people became Christians. There were so many that the khan sought to have a metropolitan appointed rather than a mere bishop.¹⁴ Timothy was also responsible for evangelization work among the eastern Turks, who occupied land stretching east from the Aral Sea and the Iaxartes (now Syr Dar’ya) River into “the Mongolian steppes and the region north of Tien Shan.”¹⁵ Thomas of Marga (ninth century) tells us that for one missionary effort Timothy selected more than eighty monks to work among the Dailamites and Gilanians, who lived southeast of the Caspian Sea, and other people beyond them who also worshiped trees and a variety of animals. Few if any Christians had ever preached to these peoples. The monks worked miracles among them and baptized many. Because of their efforts the monks had a vaunted reputation among Christians all over the East.¹⁶

Timothy planned to ordain a bishop for Tibetans and probably knew of, and had authority over, some Christian communities along the Silk Road who sent their own missionaries farther east.¹⁷ At Tanske, Ladakh, in what was formerly western Tibet (now in the northeastern area of Kashmir claimed by Pakistan), rock carvings include Nestorian crosses and some Christian texts written in Sogdian that tell of missionaries from that land (now primarily parts of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) who took the Gospel to Tibet.¹⁸ Timothy also insisted that a local archdeacon in India should be viewed as the “head of the faithful,” even though

he served under a bishop. The archdeacon apparently knew the culture and the language better than the bishop and thus was the more effective leader.

Around 800 Timothy remarked with delight that now the “Holy, Holy, Holy” of the Eucharist liturgy was being sung in different languages by Persians, Turks, Indians, Tibetans, and Chinese.¹⁹ Although archaeological digs have shown that East Syrian liturgical books written in Syriac were widely spread throughout the East,²⁰ evidently worship services, pastoral care, and evangelism often occurred in the indigenous tongues. Gravestones indicate that people of quite varied languages were East Syrian Christians.

Interaction with Other Christian Groups

A second prong of what Timothy understood as his mission was to interact both harshly and graciously with other Christians who did not see the Gospel as he did. The heretical name “Nestorian” had been attached to his church. A number of histories, even some of the newer ones concerned with world Christianity, still use the name “Nestorian” to refer to this church. This designation as heretics was what forced some Syriac-speaking Christians out of the Roman Empire after the decision of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 against Nestorius (d. 451). The Second Council of Constantinople, in 553, declared that Theodore of Mopseustia (d. ca. 428) was heretical in his person and works, and that some of the writings of Theodoret of Cyrus (d. between 457 and 466) as well as Ibas of Edessa (d. 457) were heretical in their responses to Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444). That declaration pushed other East Syrian Christians across the line. Timothy’s community thus included the painful and yet to them honorable memory of being branded enemies of the faith.

As the most prominent leader of the East Syrian Church, Timothy did not abandon his tradition in an attempt to welcome other Christians. He held councils in Baghdad to codify the church’s canon law, and was himself a superb canonist.²¹ He insisted that the church’s doctrine was sound and in at least one place referred to his communion as *the* Orthodox Church.²² His portrayal of that faith, however, is fascinating. In the fifty-nine letters that we still have from him (there seem to have been at least two hundred epistles originally), he quotes Gregory of Nazianzus (“the Theologian,” d. 390), the father of Greek Orthodoxy, a bit more than he cites Nestorius. He argues that Gregory, in his work *On the Son*, defends an understanding of the union of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ that demonstrates the correctness of the traditional East Syrian view.²³

As a student of Gregory for over thirty-five years, I remember being astounded when I first read Timothy’s claim. In his edition of Gregory’s *Five Theological Orations*, Arthur Mason delicately warned that there were at least twelve passages in which Gregory appeared to be very Nestorian in assuming that there was a full human “person” in Jesus Christ.²⁴ Actually, Nestorius, Gregory, and Timothy did not teach two separate persons. But some sections of the New Testament make one wonder whether it would be so bad to have Gregory and these other two as part of one’s heritage. When Jesus in Gethsemane prayed, “Not my will but yours be done,” who is speaking of his will as not that of the Father? When he cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” who was calling out to his God? Such questions have never been easy to answer.

Timothy prepared a work that concentrated directly on Gregory’s writings, either a translation of selected passages or a commentary on such pieces. Sadly, it has been lost—unless it lies

hidden in Rome, Paris, some Iraqi monastery, or a library of the Thomas Christians in Kerala, India, where most of his other known manuscripts now reside.

The catholicos did not merely carry on conversations with the Chalcedonians in western Syria or those sprinkled throughout the eastern regions where his churches were present. He also wrote about them, often referring to them disdainfully as the Melkites (i.e., royalists, adherents of the Byzantine emperor). He also had called the Monophysite group “Jacobites,” a reference to their mangy but effective missionary Jacob Baradaeus (d. 578). Timothy disagreed with some of their important theological teachings and said so both within his own circles and in conversations with Muslims. As he once mentioned to the caliph, these Melkites and Jacobites, not the East Syrians, taught that God died in Jesus’ crucifixion.²⁵ He even accused Bishop Severus of Antioch, a Monophysite, of intentionally corrupting the biblical text.²⁶

Yet Timothy wanted to stay as close to these Christians as he thought possible. At least once he insisted that all three groups believed in one *ousia* (essence) and three *hypostases* (persons) in the Trinity.²⁷ They also “confess[ed] in the same manner our Savior as true God and true man. And not about the union [of the natures] itself is there quarrel or contest between us, but about the manner and kind of the union.”²⁸ Deeply conflicted about relationships with Melkites and Jacobites, Timothy could both see and articulate significant themes that they shared with his communities.

Positive View of Muhammad

Finally, the catholicos not only was a mission administrator but also was an active missionary himself. In 781 Caliph al-Mahdi (775–85) invited Timothy to return to the court in order to discuss religion. Timothy evidently went under the protection of the *majlis*, a type of decree that encouraged those invited to the palace to talk freely about whatever they knew of their religion and Islam without any threat of death. That institution was one of the pillars of the great Muslim university system that eventually emerged when Europeans had scarcely dreamed of such institutions.

Al-Mahdi had spoken with Timothy before. Now he wanted to understand more about the Christians. They debated for two days. The caliph already knew a great deal, but most of what he understood represented Muslim stereotypes of Christian doctrine. While listening to Timothy’s initial “complimentary address” about “God and his eternity,” he broke in and asked how such a wise person as the catholicos could worship a god who married a woman and had intercourse with her that produced a child. Surely such deeds were unthinkable of God. Timothy responded that the Holy Spirit had no genitals. The conception of Christ was not like that of a human.²⁹

The caliph also wondered how anyone could worship three gods. Certainly Father, Son, and Spirit were three and not one. Away with this three—worship the one true God! The catholicos responded respectfully with selected images. The sun is one and has its spherical shape, light, and heat. The three-denarii gold piece, a part of Muslim currency, was clearly one and three. In each case the oneness did not cancel the threeness.³⁰

Neither man convinced the other, but both probably understood a bit more after the dialogue. The catholicos conceded that if the Gospel had actually mentioned Muhammad as a prophet to come, then he and others would have accepted him.³¹ When al-Mahdi pressed Timothy on the second day for what he thought

of Muhammad, the patriarch went further than he had gone during the first day. He had already said that Muhammad was not a prophet like Moses and that he was not the Holy Spirit incarnate, thus not the reality promised by Old and New Testament prophecy. Still the caliph found that a series of Timothy’s utterances would have been both true and well stated if he had accepted the Prophet. A large part of what al-Mahdi affirmed was the catholicos’s positive assessment of Muhammad, which I quote in full here.

Muhammad is worthy of all praise by all reasonable people, O my Sovereign. He walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of the one God, and since Muhammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Further, all the prophets drove men away from bad works, and brought them nearer to good works, and since Muhammad drove his people away from bad works and brought them nearer to good ones, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Again, all the prophets separated men from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to God and his worship. And since Muhammad separated his people from idolatry and polytheism and attached them to the worship and the knowledge of one God, beside whom there is no other God, it is obvious that he walked in the path of the prophets. Finally Muhammad taught about God, His Word and His Spirit, and since all the prophets had prophesied about God, His Word and His Spirit, Muhammad walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets.³²

The catholicos was mistaken in thinking that the Qur’an taught the threeness of God, his Word, and his Spirit. He interpreted one three-letter root in Arabic that appeared at the beginning of some suras as representing what Christians would call Trinitarian doctrine; he also noted that the Qur’an spoke of God

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in both the singular and the plural. Surely he would have thought less of Muhammad had he known that the Muslim prophet did not teach the Trinity. But his other points are sound.

Both Timothy and al-Mahdi were deeply wrong in their shared hatred of Jews. And the catholicos could be two-faced about Muslims, occasionally referring to them in his writings to Christians as “new Jews.” Timothy also had lesser failings. Though he was praised as a skilled writer who taught the arts through his epistles, he was not a very good preacher.³³

Yet as we look daily at Baghdad and try to think clearly about Muslims in Iraq or elsewhere, Timothy’s public assessment of Muhammad is a grand place to start. This significant Christian missionary insisted that Islam was neither primarily a Christian heresy nor totally a devilish abomination. In important ways Muhammad walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God. As the catholicos did, some of us see Muhammad neither as a prophet like Moses nor the Holy Spirit incarnate. Yet all Christians, even those persecuted by rabid

Muslims, should eventually acknowledge that all reasonable people should praise the Prophet for certain of his views and actions. At the same time we must reject the militant Islamists, as the bulk of Muslims themselves do.

Timothy as Model

Paying attention to Timothy I of Baghdad can help us in approaching other religions and questions of heresy. Christian faith is missionary. It is not wrong to educate missionaries well and send them out widely. Urging them to stay true to the pearl of the faith and to honor both the language and culture of the people they serve is excellent advice. Not depending upon governmental establishment also makes sense. Meddling almost always

follows. Opening conversations with others who called themselves Christians allowed Timothy to talk with those who also were minorities in their homelands, as the East Syrians were. He was an understanding but tough ecumenist.

Five hundred years later, when the East Syrian Church was weakening in Asia, Timothy of Baghdad was sorely missed. That church was becoming turned in on itself and growing so enamored with the world and native religions around it that it no longer had a strong distinctive witness and it almost disappeared.³⁴

As Timothy I, probably the most significant catholicos of Baghdad, becomes better known in the history of world Christianity, we will be able to view our own situations with more insight. It is good to see him regain his place.

Notes

1. Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 272–78.
2. Kenneth Scott Latourette speaks of Timothy in *The Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 2, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty, A.D. 500–A.D. 1000* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), pp. 274, 277. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), does not mention him. I discovered Timothy as I was writing *Christianity: A Short Global History* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002); see pp. 82, 89. Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *A History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 284–88, 307–10, 313, 337, deal with him. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, *Readings in World Christian History*, vol. 1, *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), devote section 45 to his *Apology*. A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. 1, *From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1982), pp. 83, 88, 100–2, 181–83, shows Timothy's importance for Indian Christianity. A Chinese student studying at Yale Divinity School told me that she first learned of Timothy's importance through church history courses she had taken in China.
3. Hans Putnam, *L'église et l'Islam sous Timothée I (780–823)* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1975), pp. 4–11.
4. Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia*, p. 150.
5. A. S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 240.
6. E. A. W. Budge, ed. and trans., *The Book of Governors: The "Historia Monastica" of Thomas, Bishop of Marga*, 2 vols. (London: K. Paul, 1893), 2:380–81.
7. Oskar Braun, "Briefe des Katholikos Timotheos I," *Oriens Christianus* 2 (1902): 4–5.
8. Thomas Hurst, "The Syriac Letters of Timothy I (727–823): A Study in Christian-Muslim Controversy" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic Univ. of America, 1986), p. 86. Specialists on Origen seem not to know that Timothy would be able to find a *Hexapla* to have copied.
9. L. E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia: From the Time of Muhammad till the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1933; repr., New York: Howard Fertig, 1967), p. 57.
10. Raphaël Bidawid, *Les lettres du Patriarche Nestorian Timothée I* (Vatican City: Vatican Apostolic Library, 1956), p. 41.
11. Hurst, "Syriac Letters," pp. 20, iii.
12. Alphonse Mingana, "The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9 (1925): 307.
13. Irvin and Sunquist, *A History of the World Christian Movement*, 1:285.
14. Mingana, "Early Spread of Christianity," p. 306.
15. Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia*, p. 221.
16. Mingana, "Early Spread of Christianity," p. 307.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
18. Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia*, p. 223.
19. Wolfgang Hage, "Einheimische Volkssprachen und syrische Kirchensprache in der nestorianischen Asienmission," in *Erkenntnisse und Meinungen*, vol. 2, ed. Gernot Wiessner (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978), p. 136.
20. Wolfgang Hage, *Syriac Christianity in the East* (Kottayam, India: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1997), pp. 43–56.
21. Hurst, "Syriac Letters," p. 117.
22. Alphonse Mingana, "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch Before the Caliph Mahdi," *Woodbrooke Studies*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Heffer, 1928), p. 16.
23. Hurst, "Syriac Letters," p. 109.
24. Arthur James Mason, *The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1899), pp. xvi–xix. See also Frederick Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazianzen* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), p. 48.
25. Mingana, "Apology of Timothy the Patriarch," pp. 87–88.
26. Hurst, "Syriac Letters," p. 88.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
28. Wolfgang Hage, "Das Nebeneinander christlicher Konfessionen im mittelalterlichen Zentralasien," in *17. deutscher Orientalistentag, vom 21. bis 27. Juli 1968 in Würzburg*, Vorträge, pt. 2, ed. W. Voigt (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1969), p. 521.
29. Mingana, "Apology of Timothy the Patriarch," pp. 17–22.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 22, 23, 26. In the last three instances he speaks of the taste and smell with an apple, or the heat and light with the sun, as one would talk of the Son and the Holy Spirit with God.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 54; Hurst, "Syriac Letters," p. 107.
32. Mingana, "Apology of Timothy the Patriarch," p. 61.
33. Hurst, "Syriac Letters," pp. 35, 162, 24.
34. Hage, *Syriac Christianity*, pp. 43–56.