



BĀBAY THE GREAT

BĀBAY THE GREAT (d. 628), the head of the Nestorian church in Iran under Ḳosrow II.

Bābay, to whom the Nestorian church gave the epithet *Rabbā* “the Great,” is the most eminent personality in Syrian monasticism and ecclesiastical life as well as in the area of literary culture in Iran during the last generations before the Islamic invasion. He was the first prolific author among the East Syrians.

Born in the village of Bēt ‘Aynātā in Bēt Zabday, he received instruction in Persian and then started his medical studies at Nisibis, at the same time attending theological courses offered in the School of Nisibis (q.v.). Soon, he was drawn by the fame of Abraham of Kaškar (al-Wāseṭ), distinguished for his ascetic virtues and reforms in the Persian monasteries, and decided to devote his life to monasticism. He entered the monastery of Īzlā, then under the leadership of Abraham, which was later to become the scene of his activities. Later he founded a monastery in his home country on the estate of his well-to-do parents, adding to it a significant school. When Abbot Dādīšō’, successor of Abraham, died in 604, Bābay became the third abbot of the monastery of Īzlā, which had become the leading monastery in Persia.

Bābay is said to be the author of a number of works on monastic discipline, especially for novices, and on monastic asceticism for monks, but it is uncertain whether these works date to this period. The only document of this kind which can be ascribed to him with certainty is his rules for the community of his monastery, now extant only in Arabic translation (*Syriac*



and Arabic Documents, pp. 179 ff.). Other extant works of his comprise commentaries on ascetic and mystical themes, the extensive *Centuria* of Evagrius Ponticus, and on the discourse of Marqos the monk on the spiritual law. However, according to 'Abdīšō's *Catalogus librorum*, pp. 88 ff., the first history of Syriac literature, his production was enormous, altogether 83 works in various fields. His exegetical work on the whole text of the Scripture has not survived, but the exposition of his important work on the Nestorian christology can be traced in the extant work. He paid especial attention to the monastico-historical genre. He himself testifies that he produced a large number of such biographies, including a work on a number of eminent monks of the monastic community of Īzlā. Only a few of his hagiographical works have survived; the rest are known only by titles. His literary legacy includes also liturgico-historical and liturgical works, metrical as well as in prose, the most outstanding being his works on commemorations and feasts throughout the ecclesiastical year. Thomas of Margā dedicated a chapter of his *Historia Monastica* (I, p. 27) to him, extolling his learning, prolific literary output, and sanctity of life. Bābay enjoyed an authority which exceeded that of all his contemporaries.

The rule of Ƙosrow brought heavy suppression and persecution to the church and after the death of Catholicos Grīgōr of Kaškar (607) until the death of Ƙosrow the church had no head. Under these circumstances it was impossible to elect a new catholicos and so the metropolitans of Nisibis, Ḥadiyab, and Karkā de-Bēt Šelōk (or Bēt Garmay) by a joint action authorized Bābay to act as inspector-general of the monasteries. Since it was common knowledge that he was a monk and not a bishop, he could carry out the ecclesiastical visitations without anybody suspecting that a new head of the church had been elected. They also needed Bābay to counter the infiltration of heterodox trends in the monastic communities. Bābay performed the entrusted task so well that after the death of Ƙosrow and during the rule of Šērōē (Šīrūya) when a new catholicos was to be elected, Bābay was regarded as the natural choice, and, not surprisingly, the Synod of 627-28 unanimously elected him to the dignity of catholicos. Bābay, however, declined. He died not much later at the age of 77 years. He had then ruled over his monastery for 24 years.



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