



MĀR ABĀ

MĀR ABĀ, 6th-century Zoroastrian convert to Christianity. Mār Abā was born into a Zoroastrian family during the last decades of the 5th century CE, and held a high position at the court of Ḳosrow I. After his conversion to Christianity (about 520/525 CE) he pursued his theological studies in famous Christian theological centers such as Nisibis, Edessa, or Antiochia.

From 540-552 CE he served as catholicos for the Church of the East. The main sources on him- a biographical account (Peeters, 1951) and a collection of his canons (Braun, 1900, 138-45) – tell us that in his capacity as catholicos, Mār Abā was able to reorganize his church (either in December 543 or January 544) through the reintroduction of celibacy for clerics and the avoidance of next-of-kin marriages; he died in 552, after years of persecution at the hands of the Zoroastrian clergy.

The tensions between Mār Abā and the Zoroastrian clergy did not arise from crude polemics without any theological basis against Zoroastrianism, for Mār Abā was well aware of Zoroastrian teachings. As a former Zoroastrian, his conversion to Christianity was one aspect of the dispute with Zoroastrian priests, as was his success in winning over Zoroastrians to the Church of the East, which further led to his interference in lawsuits on behalf of Christians, especially in marriage law. Thus, conversion to Christianity not only meant a religious change, but also had consequences for social relations within the Sasanian Empire. Even though Mār Abā was brought up as a Zoroastrian, he was not favorable to Christianity in an “Iranian garb” or the adaptation of Iranian customs in order to bring the Christian community closer to Iranian



culture. He was, for example, critical of those fellow Christians of his who, even after conversion from Zoroastrianism, still showed some sympathy for Zoroastrian practices like “taking wāz” or *xwēdōdah* ‘next-of-kin marriage.’

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