

The Priesthood and its Ranks in the East Syriac Tradition

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Introduction

The earthly Church gathers and unites with the heavenly Church in the Holy Mass. There, the prayers of clerics are mixed with the voices of angels to glorify and praise the Lord around the altar. Christ did not leave the Church without a sacrament of leadership and service. As an ongoing sacrament, Holy Orders is God's gift of assistance and strength for the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the ministry of service leading to the holiness of all. Therefore, according to the theology of the Church of the East, the Priesthood is counted as the first of the seven sacraments of the Church of the East, for by it all of the other sacraments are perfected and administered. The Sacrament of Holy Orders is when a member of the Church is ordained or accepts the responsibilities of a spiritual leader in the church. Through their leadership in the Church, they help continue Jesus' presence on earth in the tradition of the apostles. In general, one very important principle which the apostolic Churches hold on to is the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. This means that what happened in the Old Testament was a foreshadowing of that which is perfected in the New Testament and then continues in the apostolic churches.

In this article, some biblical points will be presented concerning the Holy Orders and its function in ecclesiastical services within the East Syriac¹ tradition. Many of us comprehend the ecclesiastical degrees in the Church of the East, but perhaps there are some who do not know what the duties of each of these ranks are, where this division came from and why it was divided in such a way. Before exploring the foregoing topics, it is best to know the original word for the cleric. This word includes all ecclesiastical ranks, which is derived from a Greek word meaning *the lot* and took place when Matthias replaced Judas Iscariot as he had casting lots fall upon him, which symbolized him getting elected to take over the apostolic ministry.²

Biblical overview of the Priesthood

The origins of the priesthood can be traced back to the Old Testament. Although all of Israel was regarded as a holy nation, this did not mean that all Israelites had the privilege to function as priests. When we are looking at the Old Testament, we will find

¹Throughout this article, the term "East-Syriac" is used interchangeably to refer to the Assyrian Church of the East. Oftentimes, the term "East-Syriac" is used by theological scholars to distinguish it from the term used to refer to "West-Syriac", which is often used to make reference to the Syriac Orthodox Church.

²See: Acts 1:20.

that God himself had instituted the priesthood of which Aaron, the brother of Moses, and Aaron's sons (tribe of Levi) were ministers and successors. This priesthood was passed on by the rite of ordination whereby Aaron, as the first high priest of the law, and his sons were inducted into the priestly ministry.³ As well, another instance in the Old Testament can be found in Genesis where Abraham was met by the king of Salem, whose name is Melchizedek "king of righteousness" and who was not only the king but also a priest of God. He brought forth bread and wine and made an offering of them, while blessing Abram.⁴

As mentioned earlier, one of the tribes of ancient Israel, the tribe of Levi, was set apart for priestly service. Their tribe's role was to stay with the Ark of the Covenant and to offer the required sacrifices for the people's sins.⁵ Later, after Solomon built the first Temple, the tribe's duties included leading the prayers and sacrifices offered at the Temple and interpreting the Law of the Old Covenant. This role continued into the time of Christ. For these reasons the early Church recognized that "Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come."⁶ Jesus came to complete the law and the prophets, reiterating the principle of continuity between the Old and New Testament that God is one. In Christ, the scripture is fulfilled and finds its culmination. Christ is the eternal high-priest who remains forever, in the likeness of Melchizedek.⁷

The Three Essential Ranks between Biblical Perspective and the Early Church

The development of the Holy Orders is a little less clear in the Scriptures. We do know that in the early years, the first Christians gathered in people's homes to share the Eucharist. An elder in the community often led these gatherings. These elders were also called presbyters (from the Greek word for "elder"). They assisted the bishops with their work, and gradually, over time, this role became an established ministry in the Church. The presbyters were also called priests, because as celebrants of the Eucharist, they represented Christ, the high priest.

Through the ordination as a sacrament, the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time. Thus, the sacrament of apostolic ministry includes three degrees: episcopate, presbyterate, and diaconate. The word *hierarchy* is used here to indicate the three grades of bishop, priest,

³See: Exodus 29:35-46.

⁴See: Genesis 14:19-20.

⁵See Numbers 3:5-10.

⁶See Hebrews 9:11.

⁷See: Hebrews 7:1-3, 17; Psalm 11:4, Matthew 5:17.

and deacon. According to early church doctrine, this threefold gradation owes its existence to Divine institution. To these, the Lord handed over the administration of the Church after the Apostles. The principles and facts with regard to the mystery of the priesthood from the legal point of view are the basis of faith, the work of the Holy Spirit, the choice of ecclesiastical authority, and participation in the message of the Shepherd and his authority. We mean the ranks that are taken by hand from the Church with special prayers and fasting, and with it a gift from the Holy Spirit, especially from the most important doctrine which was Didache⁸ (the teaching of the twelve apostles). It was mentioned in the Teachings of the Apostles that bishops are shepherds, priests are teachers, and deacons are servants.⁹

In the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of the New Testament, the Apostles took leadership roles in the early Christian community. They started new communities of Christians in major cities and were seen to represent Christ in the early communities. These three orders of the ministry are divinely inspired in the Scriptures and takes place firmly in the thought of the Church until this day—the successors to the Apostles became known as bishops,¹⁰ which comes from the Greek term meaning overseer; somewhat of an inspector to help with required works of service. The Apostles began to choose men of certain qualities to assist them; hence the word priest appeared in Acts of Apostles, where it was said of Paul and Barnabas that in their preaching to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, they were elected priests in every church.¹¹

We note here that the residence of the priests is accompanied by prayers and fasts; no doubt they are the special ritual prayers.¹² The word priest comes from the Hebrew term for elder and stems from the Church of Jewish origin. The last rank is deacon which originates from the Greek word meaning service. According to the Acts, Apostles stipulated conditions that distinguished them from other believers, including to be filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, which the apostles evaluate them, by laying hands on them with prayer, to carry out certain responsibilities in the church.¹³

⁸The Didache(Koine Greek: διδασχί), also known as “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” is an enigmatic primitive Church document describing early Christian ethics, practices, and order and is dated by modern scholars to the first century.

⁹ WILIAM SULAIMAN, تعليم الرسل, t'ālym ālrs, Teachings of the Apostolic Didache, Cairo 1989, 571,579,587,

¹⁰ See Act 20:28 _ II Timothy 1:6, 11.

¹¹ See, Acts 14:23.

¹²See, Acts, 13:3.

¹³ See, Acts 6.

Hence, we recognize that God has always worked through humans. As spelled out through the Old and New Testaments, from Moses to the apostles and the divinely-inspired authors of the New Testament to the bishops of early Church councils, who recognized the divinely-inspired parts of the New Testament and defined our sacred theology. As well, this extension is also found in the ritual aspect that the sacraments are mediated through men who are instructed to represent Jesus Christ.

General Information about Ordination in East Syriac Tradition

The great East Syriac scholar and poet Abdišo Bar Berika (1318)¹⁴ considered priesthood the most significant of all the seven sacraments because through ordination of the priest, all other sacraments are bestowed upon the faithful who so wishes to receive it. In his book *Marganitha* (Pearl-ܡܪܓܢܝܬܗ) the priesthood is the most important and noble sacrament in the Church through which all other sacraments of the Church are perfected and it is the greatest gift that God gave to mankind by empowering men to forgive their fellow men's sins.¹⁵ Also, Patriarch Timothy II (1352)¹⁶ states that the mediation and blessing of the priesthood functions as a seal which makes the mystery valid and God entrusted this seal to bishops and priests.¹⁷ The outstanding East Syrian theologian Mar Narsai (502)¹⁸ composed two homilies on priesthood under the headings of "On Priesthood" and "On Holy Eucharist". These two homilies remain as a source to truly comprehend the theology of priesthood within the East Syriac Church. For him, the ordination of priests is the key to divine mercy. God gave the great seal of His divinity and thus the Holy Spirit is celebrated by the hands of the priest. As well, Mar Narsai wrote that the priest received from Holy Spirit the power by the laying of hand, and through him all sacraments are performed.¹⁹

¹⁴Abdisho Bar Berika was first bishop of Shiggar (Sinjar) in the province of Bet 'Arbaye (Arbayestan) around 1285 and before 1291 metropolitan of Nisibis and Armenia. He was the author of the *Marganitha*-ܡܪܓܢܝܬܗ (The book of the jewel). It is one of the most important ecclesiastical texts of the Assyrian Church of the East which sort of functions as a kind of theological encyclopedia.

¹⁵Mar Abdišo of Nisibis gives the standard for the validity of sacraments in Part IV, Chapter I of his book of MARGANITHA-ܡܪܓܢܝܬܗ.

¹⁶Timothy II was Patriarch of the Church of the East from 1318 to 1352. He became leader of the church at a time of profound external stress due to loss of favor with the Mongol rulers of Persia.

¹⁷WILHELM DE VRIES, Timotheus II (1318-32), über 'die sieben Gründe der kirchlichen Geheimnisse,' OCP 8 (1942), 69

¹⁸Mar Narsai (399 -502) was one of the foremost of Syriac poet and theologians. He is the most important writer of the Assyrian Church of the East, in which he is known as the 'Harp of the Spirit'. Although many of his works are likely lost, around eighty of his mêmre (ܡܡܪܐ), or verse homilies are extant.

¹⁹Connolly, H., the liturgical homilies of Narsai, Cambridge 1909, Hom. XVLL, 8, 21.

Timothy II does not speak of the priesthood, but of sacred sign whereby it is awarded from the laying on of hands (ܡܫܚܬܐ). For East Syrian fathers, the sacred sign of the holy orders has always been the laying on of hands. By the laying on of hands, the Holy Spirit is awarded for the exercise of the priestly office.²⁰ Also Išo'yahb III confirmed, that by the laying on of hands are bestowed the Holy Spirit and the priestly authority. The priesthood is derived from the Apostles in a continuous sequence by laying on of hand.²¹ In this frame, Abdišo asserted that the priesthood was conferred through the apostolic tradition by the ecclesiastical laying on of hands.²² In addition, Išo'dād of Merv²³ explains the classic text in the first Timothy Letter by saying to not neglect the gift of grace that was bestowed on the priests with the laying on of the hands (I Tim. 4:14), and he speaks about the anointing of the priesthood by writing that through it the Holy Spirit is bestowed.²⁴ This is, however, to be understood figuratively since anointing in the rite of the ordination is not known. Abdišo expressly declares the priesthood is granted with spiritual oil, i.e. by the laying on of hands, not with material or substance of oil.²⁵

Alongside the laying on of hands, there is an appropriate formula that is essential for the ordination, by which the transfer of office is indicated. This is recited over the ordained, which contains an invocation of the Holy Spirit so that he may fulfill his particular function. The synod of Mar Isaac (410) gives a description of the Episcopal ordination and says that in addition to the laying on of hands by all the bishops present, there is a liturgical prayer of laying on of hands which is spoken by the first of the bishops. Any bishop who is ordained by one bishop or two is considered invalid, which means that for a proper ordination of a bishop, at least 3 bishops are required to be present. He goes on to explain that after the ordination, comes a message from the bishops to be completed by the (ܡܫܚܬܐ).²⁶

²⁰ Sachau, E, Die Chronik von Arbela. Berlin, 1915, 42-43.

²¹ Ishoyahb III., Ishoyahb Patirichae III Liber Epistularum, edidit et vertit R.Duval. Paris 1904-1905 (CSCO) Scr. Syri, Series II, 64.

²² Wilhelm, De Vries, Sakramententheologie bei den Nestorianern, Roma 1947, 120.

²³ Mar Išo'dād of Merv (AD 850) was a bishop and prominent theologian of the Church of the East, best known for his *Commentaries* on the Old and New Testaments.

²⁴ ISHODAD OF MERV: the Commentaries of Išo'dād of Merv, edited and translated by Margaret Dunlop Gibson, Cambridge 1911-1916, Vol. II, 94, 97.

²⁵ De Vries, Sakramententheologie, 121.

²⁶ HABBI, Joseph, مجامع كنيسة المشرق / mġām' knysī ālmšrq / Synods of the Church of the East, Beirut 1999, see: Isaac 410 Canon 1, canon 11, 70 and (canon 19 the message of the Western fathers from the works of the Council of Nicaea) 62, Mar Ezekiel 576 canon 19, 337.

The Holy Orders Set up by Christ according to East Syrian Fathers

The East Syriac Fathers attribute some sacraments to Christ such as priesthood, baptism and Eucharist. Those aspect of sacraments that have been established by the apostles by the power of the Holy Spirit, such as the oil for baptism, and some of them established by the leaders of the Church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, such as the Holy Cross. For Timothy II, Christ has established for himself the primary levels of the priesthood: episcopate, priesthood and diaconate.²⁷ Timothy expressly says that it is not by chance in the church but that it is the Holy Spirit which arranges everything that is in it, which is the source of truth. However, Abdišo does not simply want to trace all of the rites of the Church back to Christ's foundation. He said explicitly elsewhere, for example, that the funeral rite and some aspects of baptism were not recorded in the Holy Scriptures.²⁸

As far as ordination is concerned, it is the general teaching of the East Syrian fathers that Christ exercised himself and used the individual ranks of the priesthood. Abdišo says in his book "The System of Ecclesiastical Rulings": *"These ranks were present in the Old Testament where also as Saint Mar Ephrem says, on a mountain of Sinai, God ordained Moses as Patriarch and Moses who ordained Aaron and sequenced to John, therefore the Lord said it is necessary to baptize from you. Thus, Moses was like the patriarch and Aaron as the bishop and their sons like the bishops and the rest of the sons of Levi as the priests and deacons."*²⁹ Then Our Lord transferred this same ordination to the Apostles. According to the synod of Išo'yahb I 585,³⁰ Christ made the Twelve Apostles patriarchs to take control of the highest ranks and in the second rank after the patriarchs he made the 70 disciples metropolitans and bishops to preach and teach the people. After the resurrection, he then selected priests and deacons in the third ranks.³¹

We find this teaching concerning Our Lord who himself used these ranks at first with the Metropolitan Išo'Bakt (8th Century) in his statement: *"Our Lord exercised the patriarchal office when he laid his hands on his disciples on the Mount of Olives. He practiced the office of metropolitan when he said to Simon: If you will be converted, strengthen your brothers (Luke 22.32). He exercised the bishop when he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit (Job 20.22), the Cor-bishop's office, when he sent them*

²⁷ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 127.

²⁸ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 81.

²⁹ ABDISHO, Ordo indiciorum ecclesiasticorum, collector, dispositus, ordinates et compositus a Mar Abisho Metropolita Nisibis et Armeniae; latine interpretatus est, notis illustravit I. M. Voste O.P., Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis 1940, Ecclesiastical system. Volume 1, part 4, chapter 3.

³⁰ Išo'yahb I was patriarch of the Church of the East from 582 to 595.

³¹ Habbi, Synods of the church of the east, 387.

out to preach two and two, and the position of visitor when he went to different places and visited them; the priesthood, when he broke his body for the disciples in the last supper hall; the deacon office when he washed the disciples' feet on the day of the Easter Lamb; the sub-deacon office when he drove the vendors out of the temple with the whip; and the reading office when the scriptures were handed over to him in the synagogue.” For him, the meaning of the raising of the hands is interpreted as laying on of hands. Hence, he said that Our Lord held the office of patriarch when he laid his hands on his disciples on the Mount of Olives.³²

An anonymous author³³ (9th century) was the first to explain when the Lord himself exercised ranks and transferred the individual offices to the apostles. He said: *“the apostles were used by him as readers when he selected the twelve and the Seventy; as a sub-deacon when he sent them two and two before him; as a deacon when he led them up Mount Tabor; as a priest when he taught them to break his body and blood; he made them bishops when he rose from the grave and came to them in the last supper hall; he used them as metropolitans when he appeared to them at Lake Tiberius; he made them Catholic when he blessed them and ascended into heaven; he presents them to patriarchs when he sends his spirit to them”.*³⁴

However, Išo ‘dād of Merv (9th century) said elsewhere that the Apostles received the high priesthood through the descent of the Holy Spirit and the 70 disciples received the priesthood. In his explanation of Chapter 6 and 13 of the Acts of the Apostles, he mentions laying on of hand as a diaconate ordination and laying on of hand on Paul and Barnabas as ordination of the priests.³⁵ According to Abdišo (13th century), Christ established the rank of patriarchy by handing over the keys to Peter. Additionally, according to Timothy II, the Lord himself instituted the three main ranks of the priesthood: bishop, priest, and deacon by the holy sign, whereby the ordination awarded is also introduced by Christ himself.³⁶ Narsai (502) said that Christ consecrated the twelve apostles by raising his hands and blessing them on his ascension. The apostles consecrated priests on behalf of Christ; the apostles began to consecrate priests

³² De Vries, Sakramententheologie, 79.

³³ He is the author of “Exposition of the Church Services” (ECS) which is 9th century liturgical commentary and the first and integral liturgical work about the East Syrian liturgy after the great liturgical reformation of Patriarch Išo’yahb III.

³⁴ Anonymus (9th Century): Anonymi Auctoris Expositio, Vol. I, Rome 1913-1915 (CSCO Scr. Syri Series II, t. 91 und 92), 116.

³⁵ Ishodad of Merv, Commentaries, Vol. IV, 9/23-24.

³⁶ De Vries, Sakramententheologie, 78.

spiritually, as they had received from the high priest who consecrated them. Thus, Christ consecrated the twelve by raising his hands and blessing them on his ascension.³⁷

Furthermore, there is a passage from the book of the *Khudra*-ܚܘܕܪܐ,³⁸ where we find out how the priesthood moves from Christ to the Apostles: “God put his hand on the head of Moses at Sinai; the latter then laid his hands on Aaron and so the laying on of hands was passed on to John the Baptist. From this it came to Christ, from Christ to the apostles.”³⁹ Therefore the laying on of hands as a sign of ordination was already practiced by the apostles on behalf of Christ. The ordained means that they are dedicated to serving the altar of the Lord and his words.

Unrepeatable Ordination

Through the laying on of hands the Holy Spirit is granted to exercise priestly authority. We ask whether this gift is given once and for all by the laying on of hands, or can be lost and then must be returned again by re-ordination. The answer of the East Syrian Fathers to this question is not uniform. This is especially true in the early centuries where the view is that the priesthood would be lost through dismissal and after re-ordination; it would have to be given again. The Synod of 544 deals with the fall of a deposed bishop. Those ordained by him must be re-ordained after they are forgiven and they show repentance.⁴⁰ Also Išō’yahb III (7th century) accepts deposed priests, for him, priests have only mere names and so demands that they be anointed, sanctified and accomplished all over again. As well, Abdišo (1290) prescribes in his canons collection a new laying on of hands by the bishop for deposed priests. But it is still to be considered whether this is an actual re-ordination. This hand-laying is not the actual re-consecration and is only a kind of blessing. That is, this hand-laying must not be a consecration in the strict sense. We find this impression by Timothy II who clearly distinguishes the laying on of hands as a kind of blessing from laying on the hand of the ordination. He said that the priest, who has lost his holiness by touching illegal things, is reintroduced into his office by laying on of hand according to the type of blessing. Ishōdad of Merv emphasizes that the Holy Spirit giving priesthood through the anointing is undoubtedly allegorical, since nothing is known of an anointing in the Eastern Syrian

³⁷ Connolly, Hom. XXXII; XVLL, 30, 63.

³⁸ For the East Syriac Church, the main liturgical formulary is the *Khudra*, or ‘Cycle,’ which contains the offices and prayers for all Sundays of the liturgical year and the Feasts of our Lord and commemorations that are observed on Fridays.

³⁹T. DARMO, ܚܘܕܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܐ / t. darmo, ed. *Ktābā dqdām wdbātar wdḥūdrā wdkashkôl wdgazâ wqālâ d’ ūdrānê c am ktābâ dmazmôrê*, Trichur 1960-61. / KHUDRA, Prayer book throughout the liturgical year, Vol.III, 629.

⁴⁰ Habbi, Synods, 242.

rite of ordination. For Abdišo, this anointing is not done with material oil as a substance, but with spiritual oil which symbolizes to the Holy Spirit and is ineffaceable.⁴¹

In any case, the priesthood and Baptism are viewed by some East Syrian fathers as something indestructible. According to Narsai, the gift of the priesthood is only taken in the future world, in which there are no more ranks and classes.⁴² It is said in *Liber Patrum*,⁴³ the gift of the priesthood is that it contributes confidentiality clearly and indelibly is stamped and embedded in our minds. Likewise, Mar Abdišo in his commentaries quotes Clemens teaching. In the apostolic canons given by Clemens around 300, he confirms that re-ordination is prohibited. Also, in the Patriarch history of Mari, it tells the story of how Patriarch John III returned the deposed bishops again, but no ordination is mentioned in any words. That means deposed clergies were not always ordained again when they were resumed or recovered.⁴⁴ The liturgical prayers do not contain anything that could be interpreted as re-ordination when a suspended priest is resumed.

However, in the case of infidelity and heresy of clerics, some east Syriac fathers confirm that any clergy, who curses God and or accept a heretic doctrine, will be suspended from his service and they will not get re-ordination. The oldest evidence of the matter that we could find is a canon of the synod of 544, which explains that the heretics' blessing is not blessings but curses. The first who basically answers our question practically is Išo'yahb III (7th Century). In his period, the question was practical because of the internal strife in the Church of the East. It was an excellent way of fighting the rebels and schematics to void their service. So this side of the question at Išo'yahb is in the foreground. Therefore his basic principle is that there can be no true priesthood outside of the Church and consequently no sacraments. Because of the apostasy from the church, the rebels lose their priesthood. As well, he writes to apostates: *"You once fell away from the rightful primacy of the Church of God and you deprived yourself of the priestly authority that canonically came upon you through the legitimate laying on of hands by the source of the Church of God. The apostates are therefore no longer able to perform priestly service", but if they dare to perform a priestly ministry after getting the letter that whatever they are trying to do is devoid of any grace*

⁴¹De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 122.

⁴²Connolly, Hom. XVII, 22.

⁴³The *Vitae Patrum* (literally *Lives of the Fathers*) is an encyclopedia of hagiographical writings on the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers of early Christianity. The volume of the original texts date from the third and fourth centuries. That were originally written in Greek were translated into Latin between the fourth and the seventh century.

⁴⁴De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 123.

of the Holy Spirit and that it is a work of impudence and folly and everyone is deprived of the power of Christian religion.”⁴⁵

In accordance with the Law Book of the Patriarch Išo Bar Nun in Canon 96, if a cleric, from Catholics to Deacon, desecrate the name of God and revile God as the son of the Israelite did in the days of great Moses, then he should be deposed and no longer minister to the people. Canon 97 states: if a cleric of five degrees (Catholics, archbishop, Bishop, Priest and Deacon) has a wrong faith and cleverly hides heretical tendency, but is then exposed to general knowledge, he should be dismissed from his priesthood so that he does not incite many since it is better that one member dies than the whole body of the church be spoiled.⁴⁶ We conclude from that the Holy Orders are granted just once. However, in case of requesting repentance, one has a chance and can be returned to service with prayers as a type of blessing and as it is mentioned above for Timothy II. However, if clerics are ordained by the suspended bishop, they should get re-ordination through laying on of hand. Hence, whoever disbelieves in the Lord or accepts a heretical teaching is suspended definitely from his service.

The Giver of the Ordination

Passing on the priesthood gift through the laying on of hands is a privilege of the bishop. Without wavering, this is the teaching of the East Syriac Church from the earliest times. As mentioned before, Abdišo quoted from apostolic canons of Clemens and in those legislations show that is responsible for the ordination. He said that according to the apostolic canons of Clemens bishop ordains priests, deacons and the other clerics. Two or three bishops are required for the ordination of Bishop. As well, he confirmed that the Simple Bishop could ordain Reader, sub-deacon, deacon and priest, and the Metropolitan may consecrate simple bishops, while the Patriarch may consecrate the Metropolitans.⁴⁷

Furthermore, from the chronicle of Arbil,⁴⁸ it appears that the giver of the holy orders was only the bishop, regardless of whether it is the ordination as deacon or priest or bishop. The author confirms that the first to carry out an ordination in Arbil, the

⁴⁵Ibid, 70-71.

⁴⁶ Eduard Sachau, *Syrische Rechtsbücher*, Zweiter Band, Berlin 1908, 161.

⁴⁷ De Vries, *Sakramententheologie*, 124.

⁴⁸ The Chronicle of Arbelanarratesthe history of East Syrian Christianity in Adiabene, a "northern Mesopotamian province located between the two Zab rivers", which is now known as Erbil, Iraq. Arbela was an "important junction point on major east-west and north-south caravan routes, and has been an occupied site since remote antiquity.

ordination of Pekidha⁴⁹ to bishop, who was ordained by the apostle Addai himself through the laying on of hands. As well, the laying on of hands was not a silent act, but was accompanied by a prayer.⁵⁰ Išo'yahb III says that the priests could not be priests without the bishops, the bishops not without the metropolitans, and the metropolitans not without the patriarchs. The anonymous expressly declares that the priest cannot give the laying on of hands. In this framework, Mar Timothy II emphasizes the Bishop as the priesthood Giver. As well, Išo'dād of Merv commented on the text in the first letter to Timothy (4:14): *Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given to thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.* It speaks of the laying on of hands by the presbyters and says that presbyters are apostles. This was with direct divine guidance. Here, prophecy means teaching, the word Presbytery means priesthood in general, and the Apostle is the rank of the episcopate, not the priesthood.⁵¹

However, regard of the grantor of the higher and lower orders is not the same in the early centuries. The Cor-bishop can grant the lower ordinations, while the higher ones are reserved for the bishop. The Anonymous (9th) too emphasizes that the ranks of the Cor-bishop and Archdeacon are awarded without laying on of hand simply by commanding the Bishop.⁵² It is worthwhile to mention that according to the *Liber Patrum and Abdišo*, the ordination of the lower steps was also the responsibility of the Cor-bishop. But he could never consecrate priests and deacons.⁵³

However, with regards to the recipient of the ordination, when contributing to the consecration, the right order must be followed. Išo'yahb I declares it illegal to consecrate a bishop who has not previously received the diaconate and priesthood. However, this does not seem to be absolutely necessary per se⁵⁴ because the Chronicle of Arbil tells how a deacon is ordained a bishop.⁵⁵ It is further provided that in the ordination liturgy, the candidate for the episcopate may be a priest or deacon. It is

⁴⁹ He is the first bishop of Adiabene and had met the Apostle Addai. He was the son of a poor man, who was in the service of a Magus. But Pekidha was greatly impressed by a miracle of healing which Addai performed, and accepted his gospel. After several years of study, he returned to his native city to teach the new faith.

⁵⁰J. B. Umberg S. J. Innsbruck, *Die Sakramente in der Chronik von Arbela*, Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie, Innsbruck, 1925, 507-509.

⁵¹Ishodad of Merv, *The commentaries*, Vol. II, 94.

⁵² Anonymous I, 114.

⁵³ De Vries, *Sakramententheologie*, 124.

⁵⁴ Habbi, *Synods*, 422.

⁵⁵Sachau, *Die Chronik von Arbela*, 43.

noteworthy that with concern to ordination according to Wilhelm of Rubruk,⁵⁶ it seems that it can also be given to minors. He tells that the Nestorians in Mongolia consecrated almost all boys to priests in the cradle. However, the statements of Latin missionaries about the customs of the Orientals should be taken with caution.⁵⁷ Briefly, we find that the bishop who has authority to give ordination by laying on of the hands by the two talents has power to consecrate both the people and the altar.

Talent Distribution of the Ecclesiastical Ranks:

Just as the Lord gave each of his servants the talents according to his ability; talents are the gifts that the Lord gives to human beings, each one according to his ability and ecclesiastical degree.⁵⁸ Likewise in the Church, the talents given through ecclesiastical ranks are distributed in order to administer the rites according to their grades and their service. Thus, the deacon kneels only one knee serving before altar because he has received one talent and the priest accepts two more talents and thus has three talents, which include one deacon and two priesthood, to complete with them the divine deeds, the sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist), preaching and discipleship. As for the bishop, he adds two more talents to these three talents, making him have five talents. He is granted two ecclesiastical Orders (People and Altar), and with these talents the gift of ecclesiastical management is completed, as is the completion of the Torah with its five books, the human body with its five senses, the hand with its five fingers, the body with five sections, and the divine dispensation in five stages. In the world: the first from Adam to the Flood, the second to Ibrahim, the third to Moses, the fourth to Christ, the fifth from the baptism of Christ to his second coming.⁵⁹ In this regard as well, for Išo'yahb I, deacons, priests and bishops receive the talents by the laying on of hands by the Lord- the deacon: one, the priest: three and the bishop: five.⁶⁰ Išo'dād of Merv makes the same distinction. He emphasizes the essential difference between the three main grades. He noted that the deacon received only one talent and therefore cannot do the work of the priest who received two talents.⁶¹

⁵⁶William of Rubruck (1253 – 1255) was a Flemish Franciscan missionary and explorer. His account of his travels is one of the masterpieces of medieval geographical literature, comparable to those of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta. He travelled to various places of the Mongol Empire in Asia before his return to Europe.

⁵⁷ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 125

⁵⁸Matthew 25:14-30

⁵⁹ Habbi, Synods, 422.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 422-423.

⁶¹ De Vries, Sakramententheologie, 126.

The Individual Ranks of the Priesthood, Their Ordinations and Authority

A. The Rankings

The main grades are rightly considered by the East Syrian fathers: Episcopate, Priesthood and Diaconate. For the oldest period, the chronicle of Arbil only mentions two grades: bishops and deacons. The author therefore found only witnesses to bishops and deacons in his sources for the primeval Christian period. It touches very closely with the Didache (the teaching of the twelve apostles) and the first letter to Clement. The Didache gives the instruction in chapter 15: Order bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord. Even for the time of the fourth bishop of Arbela, Abraham (from 136-151) the priests were not mentioned yet. But it was only under Bishop Noah (from 151-167) where mention that priests who were consecrated by the bishop had begun. That means the first time the word priest was mentioned was in the chronicle of Arbela after 151 A.C.⁶² As well, the files of the Persian martyrs often mention bishops, priests and deacons. With regard to role of the Sub-deacon, we find it for the first time in the report on the martyrdom of Blessed Mar Abda. In addition to the three main ranks, the biography of Catholic Mar Aba (552) also speaks of 'other church grades' without mentioning them.⁶³ The Synod of Išō'yahb I (585) distinguished among the rank of the episcopate: patriarchs, metropolitans and simple bishops.⁶⁴ As well, Salomon of Basra makes the three levels of angels correspond to the three levels of priesthood: high priest, priest and servant.⁶⁵

In addition to these main ranks, a number of others are mentioned. However, it is important to mention that the East Syriac fathers were not in agreement on the ranking. We sometimes find a ninth rank, according to the nine choirs of the angels, but this number is clearly rejected by some. We reach the parallel to the nine choirs of angels for the first time at the Metropolitan Išō'Bakt (8th Century). For him, there are Cherubim and patriarchs, Seraphim and Catholics, thrones and metropolitan, rulers and bishops, forces and Visitators, powers and priests, principalities and deacons, archangels and sub-deacons, and angels and readers.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Johannan Bar Zo'bi (13th century)⁶⁷

⁶² J. B. UMBERG, S. J. INNSBRUCK, Die Sakramente in der Chronik von Arbela, Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie, Innsbruck, 1925, P. 505. See: Sachau, Die Chronik der Arbela, 54.

⁶³ BRAUN O., Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer, Kempten-München 1914, 5, 41, 100, 139, 207.

⁶⁴ Habbi, Synods, 387.

⁶⁵ Shelemon von Basra (13 Century): The book of the bee, edited by E. A. Wallis Budge. Oxford 1886. Semitic Series, Vol. I, Part. II., 9.

⁶⁶ Ishobokt (8th century): from the book of the Metropolitan Ishobokt. Borg. Syr. 88, 346.

⁶⁷ He was a priest monk of the famous monastery of Beth Qoqa in Adiabene. He was the author of an important grammar (unpublished) and a number of verse works on philosophy and liturgy.

speaks about the nine ranks of the priesthood analogous to the nine ranks of the angels without enumerating them.⁶⁸ Moreover, the *Liber Patrum* distinguishes three levels of priesthood, each of which has three degrees, exactly according to the levels and degrees in the angelic world: first level: high priests (patriarchs, metropolitan and bishops); second stage: priests:(cor-bishop, visitors,⁶⁹ and priests); and third stage: servants (deacons, sub-deacons and readers).⁷⁰ As you can see, the type of enumeration is not uniform, but the trinity, episcopate, priesthood and diaconate always emerge.

Other than that, we find another suggestion concerning ranks. The anonymous Author gives the levels: reader, sub-deacon, deacon; Priest, Periodeut-ܩܘܪܝܘܬܐ,⁷¹ cor-bishop; Bishop, Metropolitan, Catholics. He initially objected that the patriarch cannot be classified in this list. Furthermore, he does not want to know anything about the comparison of the priestly ranks with those of the angels. He said that the service of the priest is higher than that of the angel. The seraph touched the glowing coal with the tongs, which is only a model or representation of the Holy Eucharist. The priest, on the other hand, distributes the Holy Eucharist, the fulfillment of the example. In addition, the priest calls down the Holy Spirit while Gabriel only announces him.⁷² As well, Timothy II also grants other names of ranks and rejects the official list. He introduces them in the following form: patriarch, metropolitan, bishop; priest, deacon, sub deacon, reader, singer, and exorcist. Timothy relies on Bar Hebrews, who in turn follows Ps. Dionysius. For him, the three grades of the highest hierarchy are essentially the same. The patriarch cannot consecrate a bishop alone, and conversely a bishop alone cannot consecrate the patriarch. He utters also that readers, singers and exorcists are not ordained by laying on of hands since they are only given authority to service. Hence, these offices cannot be listed as priesthood ranks. Moreover, the same applies to the sub-deacons which are only designated to receive the office.⁷³ We occasionally find other counts or understandings on the subject. Išo Bar Nun speaks of five degrees of the church hierarchy and he calls these degrees: deacon, priest, bishop, archbishop, Catholics.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Wilhelm De Vries, *Die Erklärung alle göttlichen Geheimnisse des Nestorianers Johannan Bar Zobi* (13.Jahrh.), *Orientalia Christina Periodica*, Volumen IX, Roma 1948, 203.

⁶⁹ Mar Abdisho brings almost the same list; only he refers to the archdeacon instead of the Visitor.

⁷⁰ De Vries, *Sakramententheologie*, 127.

⁷¹ A Periodeut in the Eastern Churches is a higher cleric (priest) who was commissioned to visit the rural parishes and was ordained specifically for this. In Syriac: called ܩܘܪܝܘܬܐ.

⁷² Anonymous, I., 113, 116-117.

⁷³ De Vries, *Timotheus II*, 85.

⁷⁴ De Vries, *Sakramententheologie*, 128.

Therefore, the East Syrian fathers mostly speak of nine priesthood ranks. All levels, including the lower levels, somehow participate in the priesthood. However, it is already clear from the previous statements that the Patristic distinguish between higher and lower orders. It is often a valid inquiry as to the reason why there are two different levels, since there is a distinction made early on between actual ordination by laying on hand (by invoking the Holy Spirit) and figurative ordination without laying on of hands and invocation.⁷⁵ A synod of Ezkiel 576 highlights the decisions between the clergy and presidential progression.⁷⁶ In this same direction, Abdišo clearly says that the reader is ordained without laying on of hand. As for the sub deacon, he does not mention any laying on of hand. According to Mar Timothy II, the reader, singer, exorcist and sub-deacon not consecrated by laying on of hand, unlike the priest and deacon. For him, the monastic ordination differs from the other consecrations in that the invocation of the Holy Spirit is missing here. Likewise, the Anonymous author confirms that the degrees of Cor-bishop and Periodeut are conferred without laying on of hand, but by simple command of the bishop. He further mentioned Deaconess and gatekeepers among the other ranks.⁷⁷ It is noteworthy that within the rite of Ordination, it is emphasized that readers and sub-deacons are not signed on the forehead and that the Holy Spirit does not descend on them.⁷⁸

Furthermore, we have to assume that both authors—Mar Abdišo and Mar Timothy II—reproduce older sources regardless of the customs of their time. It is worth noting the list of the holy orders from Mar Abdišo (13th century) which was officially adopted by the Church of the East today. That list is as follows: Patriarch (Catholicos), Metropolitan, Bishop, Archdeacon, Cor-bishop, Priest, Deacon, Sub-deacon and Reader. This means that the number nine is predominant and reflects the application and understanding within the Church of the East.

B. The Basic Principle of the Number Nine of Priestly Ranks in East Syrian Church

Some people may ask why there are nine holy degrees in our church. We have noticed the influence of our church fathers on this number, and to this day it is applied officially in liturgical tradition. Since the end of the fifth century, important Mystic writings appeared in the church under the name Dionysius the Areopagite⁷⁹ and had the

⁷⁵ Ibid, 56-57.

⁷⁶ Habbi, Synods, 333-334.

⁷⁷ De Vries, Sakramententheologie, 57, 129.

⁷⁸ See: ܩܘܪܕܢܐ ܩܘܪܕܐ, Liturgy of the Ordination of the Assyrian Church of the East, 20.

⁷⁹ Saint Dionysius the Areopagite was a judge at the Areopagus Court in Athens, who lived in the first century. He is the one mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (34:17). He was guided by faith in the Lord

greatest impact on theological thought during that time and in the subsequent generations. However, the scholars unanimously agreed that these writings could not be that of Dionysius, who died in the first century AD, in contrast, to an unidentified writer who lived in Syria in the late fifth century. This is the reason why these writings became known as "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite" after the Christian theologian and philosopher of the late 5th Century. We have four famous and important theological literatures that its author claims to be Dionysius the Areopagite (that is, attributed to the non-writer). We will present their contents and topics in the following: The Areopagite wrote four books. In the first book "Divine Names" the author speaks in this book about the names of God mentioned in the Bible, explaining the essence of God and his attributes. In the second book "Mystical Theology" there are five chapters that talk about the union of the soul in God. The soul unites with God directly in contemplation of attraction. The third book "The Heavenly ranks" contains details about the world of the heavenly spirits (i.e. angels), their nature, their characteristics, and their division into three angels, each of them has three choirs. Lastly, in the fourth book, Ecclesiastical rank, the author explains the ecclesiastical and laity ecclesiastical ranks in detail. The Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite is based on passages from the Old and New Testaments, like the other writings of this great mystic.⁸⁰

While there is no specific passage in the Bible that lists out the nine orders of angels, there are parts of Scripture that speak to an angelic hierarchy. Pseudo-Dionysius, a Christian philosopher of the late 5th century, drew on passages from the New Testament as well as other sources of knowledge to put forth an angelic hierarchy which is featured in his book "The celestial hierarchy". Within it, angels are organized into three hierarchies and nine orders (also called choirs) for them to be classified and ranked on. Those three hierarchies contain three choirs based on their proximity to God corresponding to the nine orders of angels which are: 1) Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones; 2) Dominations, Virtues, and Powers; and 3) Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Distinctions and characteristics for the three triads are as follows:

1. The first triad, the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones, are nearest to the Godhead, ever dwelling in the vestibule of Divinity.

Jesus Christ by the Apostle Paul during his visit to Athens. He was fascinated by Greek philosophy. According to Dionysius (170), Bishop of Corinth, as quoted by Eusebius, he was one of the first Athenians to believe in Christ and perhaps became the first bishop in Athena.

⁸⁰ The Bible plainly teaches that angels exist. There are more than 250 mentions of angels in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. See: Isaiah 6:1-7, Rv 4-6, Jude 9; 1 Thes 4:16, Tb 12:6, 15; Jn 5:4; Rv 12:7-9, Dn 9:21-27, Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:10, 15, 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 3:10; Col 2:15, Eph 1:21; Col 1:16.

2. The second triad, the Dominions, Virtues, and Powers, are given the middle place as indicating the ordered governance of Providence. Through them the soul is liberated from all that is below and assimilated to that which is above.
3. The third triad, the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels, belong to the final execution of the work of Providence. They impart to the soul the spiritual light through which it may learn to read this divine book. The Angels minister to all men and to the things of nature, purifying and uplifting them. In our liturgical life, through the earthly hierarchy, we can reach to the purification, illumination and contemplation whereby people fulfill a spiritual union with God.⁸¹

C. The Earthly Church is a Symbol of what is in the Heavenly Church

The choirs of angels sing continuous praise to God in heaven. The priestly ministry of the Church on earth is a mirror of that continual praise. The work of the brilliant fourth century fathers of the Church of the East St. Ephrem (c.373) is a great base and source on the topic. According to him, the angel is the living tool in the service of God created by its creator. The image Ephraim portrays is that the angel is essentially a servant. The most sublime task that the angel has to perform is the holy service before God, which extends from the completion of the heavenly liturgy to the constant serving presence in church. The angels have no throne or ruler chair and stand in front of their Lord's throne.⁸² The characteristic attitude of the angels is that of awe, fear and trembling, as an expression of this awe, he adopts the idea found in the Bible (Is 6.2). Ephraim emphasizes this above all in view of the daring human effort to explore God. Therefore, it is in complete agreement with his idea of the integration of people into the choir of angels. The angel takes a living part in the fate of man. This applies in general, insofar as all historical events in human life that Ephrem sees as salvation and so history take place as a spectacle for the heavenly. Thus, humankind and angels both are creatures of God. This relationship between the two is deepened by the new creation of man in Christ's act of redemption. In a song about the birth of Christ, Ephraim describes the salvation of Christ as a new creation of man to the angelic equality. It is obvious that Ephraim is not only talking about a purely external and natural but also liturgical Guard to say this by the word (حارس), which indicates watchful nature in the liturgical service. Just as the angels are the watchers of heaven, so too the redeemed people are like the watchers on earth like angels. The restoration of human beings follows the model of the angels. We find that in liturgical depth of patristical thought during the ancient

⁸¹Fintrz Brook, *The celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite*, England, 1935, 13-22.

⁸² Therefore, according to the liturgical interpreters the deacon is referred to as servant-حارس in liturgical service who should stand like the Angel during the Holy Mass.

centuries. The angels do not only relate to the humankind, but also to the redeemed community of the church. One can look a comparison to Heb 12:22, where the angelic hosts and the church of the firstborn sing together in heavenly Jerusalem. However, it is not only in paradise, but here on earth there are close relationships between angels and the church. While angels and believers shape a great community that celebrates a common liturgy for the glory of God, the individual members of the Church on earth correspond to the members of the Angelic community. In his commentary of I Cor 4:9, Ephraim confirms that the priests be considered as the angels on the earth. Hence, the term angels are used to refer to priests. This kind of exegesis, which interprets the angel as a priest, seems to be common property of the Syrian church, as Ephraim says, because the priest's lips drip wisdom, and the law is asked from his mouth because he is an angel of the mighty Lord. This is only reminiscent of Aphrahat (280-345).⁸³

After Mar Ephrem and Mar Aphrahat, the ancient liturgical fathers said that the arrangement found in the earthly church is a symbol of what is found in the heavenly church. Mar Timothy II says the earthly church is (ܩܘܪܬܘܢܐ) just like as the celestial church (ܩܘܪܬܘܢܐ) is divided into 3 steps and 9 degrees 'likewise in the earthly church the ranks are divided into three ranks and each one has three grades, i.e. a total of nine grades'⁸⁴. As the angels are the servants of the Lord and the mediators of the Lord, so also the clergy are physical angels who have made mediators between God and mankind.⁸⁵ In addition to this, we also find theological dimensions of cooperation in glorification between both churches exclusively in the morning prayer-ܩܘܪܬܘܢܐ ܩܘܪܬܘܢܐ on the first Sunday of the dedication of the church ܩܘܪܬܘܢܐ. In the last two lines of prayer it says: *Just as we chanted praising through our physical tongues in the Church of the Earth. Also, grant us to serve you with the angels who serve you at heavenly church.*⁸⁶

D. The Individual Ranks

As it is mentioned in above sections, the ecclesiastical Priesthood of the Assyrian Church of the East is immortalized by being handed-down in the Holy Church from the apostles and is divided into nine grades, identical to the angelic choirs of angels. The Assyrian Church of the East recognizes nine positions in its hierarch: Patriarch,

⁸³ Winfrid Cramer, Die Engel vorstellungen bei Ephräm dem Syrer, Orientalia Christiana Analecta, Roma, 1965. 126-163.

⁸⁴As we mentioned before, it is worth noting that Patriarch Timothy II depends here on Bar Hebraeus, who in turn follows Ps. Dionysius.

⁸⁵ Timothy II., Book of the Seven Reasons of Church Mysteries, Vat. Syr. 151, Vol. I, Chapter. IV.

⁸⁶Darmo, Khudra, Vol.III, 588.

Metropolitan, Bishop, Archdeacon, Cor-Bishop, Deacon, Sub-deacon and the Reader. These nine positions are described below according to the Mar Abdišo (13th century):

1. The Reader -ܘܩܪܝܢܐ

The lowest rank of the hierarchy is Reader, similar to the choir of angels known as Angels (ܘܩܪܝܢܐ). He is entrusted with the duty of reading aloud scripture excerpts at a liturgy. The meaning for the word for this rank is “chanter”. Jesus Christ served this rank when he took the scroll at the synagogue and read from the book of the Isaiah.⁸⁷ The same that applies to the reader also applies to the sub-deacon when it comes to laying on of hands. When he is ordained, Abdišo and Timothy II refuse to perform laying on of hands and the sign on his forehead and invocation of the Holy Spirit are also missing here. At the ordination, He wears a dress (ܘܩܪܝܢܐ) and he tightens his back with a cincture ܘܩܪܝܢܐ.⁸⁸ He stands at the *Qestroma*⁸⁹ extended platform before the sanctuary and is not allowed entry onto the sanctuary. The reader's duties are only reading Old Testament books during the liturgy and he is not allowed to enter onto the sanctuary or participate in the Holy Mass. Additionally, his function is confined to reading from the Old Testament as the reading from the Apostles is reserved solely for the deacon.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ See Luke 4:16-20

⁸⁸ The girdle symbolizes the willingness to serve and prepare to stand before the Lord, as the soldiers do before the kings of the earth. Its use of the divine command is mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the priests recommended the Levites to use the belt with the rest of the priestly blazers. As for the New Testament, Luke says: *Be ready for whatever comes, dressed for action and with your lamps lit, like servants who are waiting for their master to come back from a wedding feast. When he comes and knocks, they will open the door for him at once* (Luke: 12:35-36). There are three reasons for wearing a girdle. The first is because the slaves of the kings and their soldiers use the band as a sign of obedience and service. The second is because the Savior recommended it for its indication of maturity of the mind, the purity of thought and the being in wait for him, who is to return to raise everyone to him. The third is because it indicates to death, “*Another will tie up your girdle and take you where you do not wish to go*” (John 21:18). And those traveling on the road are tightening their back. We are also departing and not remaining, let us prepare for the other world with the right faith and the work of righteousness. See Abdišo, Pearl-ܘܩܪܝܢܐ, Vol. V, Chapter 6, 64-65.

⁸⁹ At the front of the Holy sanctuary there are three stairs. The ground staircase is entitled for ܘܩܪܝܢܐ to climb on it and read paragraphs from the Old Testament only. The second staircase is only entitled to climb with the rank of ܘܩܪܝܢܐ. The deacon -ܘܩܪܝܢܐ serves the Holy Mass and reads the Epistle of the Apostle. No worshiper has the right to climb any of the three steps. All worshipers sit when the reader recites passages from the Old Testament, and all worshipers stand when the deacon reads the message of the Apostle Paul and when the priest reads the Gospel.

⁹⁰ De Vries, Sakramententheologie, 143.

2. The Sub-deacon-ⲛⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ

It is a Greek word consisting of two syllables, the first meaning of under or auxiliary, and the second meaning deacon, resulting in the meaning of deacon assistant. This rank is higher than reader but less than the deacon. His functions are to read from the Old Testament, to light the lamps, to carry candles, to protect the church doors so as to not allow the entry of an animal, a non-believer or deprived, as well as maintain order and calm during the prayers. Their work and service is under the administration of deacons.

The Lord served as a sub-deacon when he made a whip from rope and drove out the money changers in the temple at Jerusalem.⁹¹ He is the eighth rank and resembles the choir of angels known as the Archangels (ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ). Abdišo and Timothy II rejected laying on of hand for the ordination of the sub-deacon. In the rite of ordination, however, there is no invocation of the Holy Spirit as in the higher ordinations. It is expressly emphasized that the Holy Spirit does not descend on the sub-deacons and also it is not signed on his forehead.

According to Canons 4 and 5 of Mar Aba 544 and Canon 4 from Mar Aba Canons in the book of the Ibn al-Tayyib (Jurisprudence of Christianity), it is not appropriate for the sub deacon to wear the Orara-ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ as the deacon. In today's rite, of course, he tightens his back with a ⲛⲁⲓ, and wraps the handkerchief (ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ) on his neck to be distinct from the deacon. And it is not suitable to move away from the gates of ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ at the time of service. He has never the right and authority to enter the sanctuary. Even according to the Anonymous Author, unlike the deacons, the sub-deacons are not allowed to enter the sanctuary. Also, he has no right to touch the holy vessels.⁹² As well, in the *Liber Patrum* the sub-deacon is forbidden to touch the sacred vessels and to administer the chalice of the blood to the faithful during the Holy Communion. However, in cases of necessity, when the deacon is absent, a sub-deacon can function as a deacon during the liturgy only with permission of the bishop. In the ancient centuries, it wasn't mentioned that the sub-deacon read the Old Testament aloud at the service.⁹³ That is the job designated for the reader who receives the book of ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ at the ordination. In fact, it

⁹¹ See John2:15-16

⁹² Habbi, Synods, 277, 284.

⁹³ Also in the priestly prayer before reading from old testament in the liturgy of the Mass that mentions only the word of the reader and did not set other options (as sub-deacon or a deacon) to read the Old Testament. As it is known to the ritual fathers that they offer options if this were required. But today all ranks of diaconate allow read book of ⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ.

is taken away from the sub-deacon.⁹⁴ The Synod of 410 recognizes in its Fifteenth Canon that the sub-deacons are also called exorcists. The same synod assigns the sub-deacon the service to stand at the doors during the service and while his ordination by bishop, who leads him up to the part of the sanctuary closest to the holy door (curtain), under the lamp (ܘܠܘܬܐ). The function of the Reader is also reading from the book of ܘܠܘܬܐ.⁹⁵ According to Išo'yahb, it is up to the sub-deacon to decorate the church, guard the doors, and light the lamps.⁹⁶ It is therefore very minor functions that the sub-deacon is responsible for. This shows the essential difference between the deacon office and that of the sub-deacon.

3. The Deacon-ܘܠܘܬܐ

The word deacon is derived from the Greek word *diákonos*, which is an ancient Greek word meaning "servant." In the Syriac language, it is called ܘܠܘܬܐ which also has the meaning of "servant." As recorded in Acts 6, it is generally assumed that the office of deacon originated in the selection of seven men by the apostles. Among them was Stephen who was charged with the task of assisting with the charitable work of the early church.⁹⁷ We previously find a canon in early church that each bishop should have only seven deacons in his diocese. However, due to the growing of the church and need for ministers, that canon was nullified. The deacon is the seventh rank in the priesthood and resembles the rank of angels known as the Principalities (ܘܠܘܬܐ ܘܠܘܬܐ). The Lord served as a deacon when he poured water into the bowl to wash the feet of the disciples in the Upper Room.⁹⁸

The ordination of deacon is structured exactly like that of the priest. During his ordination, the bishop invokes upon him the gift of the Holy Spirit in order to prepare the new deacon with the spiritual authority to perform his function. He puts the Orara (ܘܠܘܬܐ) on his left shoulder and tightens his back with a belt (ܘܠܘܬܐ) at all times during prayers. His duties are reading the letters of Apostles and participate in the Holy Eucharist. During the Liturgy, he reads the Epistle of Paul, recites the litany and administers the chalice of the blood to the believers during Communion. According to both the Apostolic Canons and East Syrian Church, the deacon cannot baptize. However some East Syrian fathers grant him the right to perform baptism in cases of extreme

⁹⁴De Vries, Sakramentenheologie, 142.

⁹⁵Habbi, Synods, 72.

⁹⁶ Ibid,143.

⁹⁷ See Act 6:1-6.

⁹⁸ See John13:5

As the name suggests, the office of the deacon is all about service. They are compared to the angels and called servants of the bishops or high priests. In accordance with Synods of Mar Išo'yahb I and Mar Awa, the liturgy should not be celebrated without a deacon or (a second priest). The deacon is the herald of the church, who calls the people's attention and invites them to pray.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the presence of at least one deacon for the valid celebration of every liturgical service is necessary and the priest cannot sanctify sacraments without him. Likewise, in the questions about engagement etc., it is deemed an abuse if priests celebrate the holy sacrifice without a deacon. Also, the deacon is particularly necessary to arrange the Eucharistic elements (i.e. to consume the remaining pieces). But, only the hermits and priests who live far from human dwellings are allowed to celebrate the liturgy without a deacon. Išo'yahb I forbids him to give Holy Communion to a priest. But if there is no other priest to give to the priest the Eucharist, the priest can place Qurbana at the hands of the deacon, and then prostrate to the body of the Lord. After that, he takes for himself with the fingers of the right hand from the hands of the deacon, then he eats it with the left fingers. If a deacon is not present, then the priest takes the Eucharist from the altar, because only the hermits and priests who live far from human dwellings are allowed to celebrate the liturgy without a deacon. However, this is done only if there was already Qurbana in the **ܩܘܪܒܢܐ**.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, the deacon is rarely called a cleaner. Babai the Great says in his commentary on Evagrius Ponticus,¹⁰⁷ that deacons clean the sanctuary. According to Timothy II as well, the deacon's office is to clean. He follows Bar Hebraeus here where Timothy II writes that except through his mediation of the priest, the deacon is not entitled to do anything of such things that belong to the service. In the apostolic canons it says that none of the other clerics are allowed to do work that the deacon does. The deacon is not allowed to bless for it is forbidden to him in the apostolic canons.¹⁰⁸

4. The Priest-ܩܘܪܒܢܐ

The Priest is derived from the Greek (πρεσβύτερος) and its meaning is an intercessor because he prays for the sake of his people. This rank is equivalent to the choirs of the angels known as Powers (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ). He is the sixth grade of the hierarchy.

¹⁰⁵ Habbi, Synods, 278, 365.

¹⁰⁶ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 141; Habbi, Synods, 402.

¹⁰⁷ Evagrius Ponticus also called Evagrius the Solitary (345-399 AD), was a Christian monk and ascetic. One of the most influential theologians in the late fourth-century church, he was well known as a thinker, polished speaker, and gifted writer. He left a promising ecclesiastical career in Constantinople and traveled to Jerusalem, where in 383 he became a monk in one of the monasteries. He then went to Egypt and spent the remaining years in asceticism and writing.

¹⁰⁸ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 139.

Our Lord served as a priest when he baptized in Judea at the time that John the Baptism was baptizing and when he broke the bread and gave his body and blood to his disciples at the last Supper.¹⁰⁹ According to the liturgy of ordination, the ordination of priest essentially consists of lying on the right hand of the bishop with appropriate prayers. The Holy Spirit is called down on the ordinand so that they can carry out their ministry with dignity. Then the candidate is given the Book of Gospel and is marked on the forehead, using the usual formula. A priest wears the dress (ܩܘܪܒܐ) and hangs stole (ܩܘܪܒܐ) from his shoulders, tightens his back with belt (ܩܘܪܐ), and wears the gothic cope (ܩܘܪܐܩܘܪܐ) which cover his whole body and symbolizes angel wings. He is considered an earthly Angel, as a mediator between God and mankind.

For Theodore of Mopsuestia, the priest is able to perform his ministry by the Holy Spirit, to reveal the sacraments. However, in his commentary on I Timothy letter, there are texts that mention laying on of hand as an introduction to the priestly office. He said that only the priests and deacons are ordained, but the sub-deacon and lecturers are not ordained before the altar and they are not for holy service, which is confined only to the priests and deacons.¹¹⁰


With reference to Išo'yahb I, Išodad and Abdišo, The priest's main authority is to offer the sacrifice and to sanctify water and oil of the baptism. Therefore, as the East Syrian fathers repeatedly emphasize, he received two more talents: celebration of the Eucharist and Baptism at his ordination and one of the deaconate which he already received, totaling three talents. In the *Liber Patrum*, we find a list of the authorities of the priest. In addition to the authorization to consecrate water and oil of the baptism and to offer the sacrifice, the functions of the priest are as follows: reading the Gospel on the platform, fulfilling marriage ceremony between man and woman, burying the dead, forgiving the transgressors, and fulfilling all the necessary functions of the priesthood, except for the consecration of an altar with oil. A priest may also unite or unbind married couples and visit sick people to heal them. Likewise, in the rite of consecration, the following powers are spoken in the prayer accompanying the laying on of hands, the priest: puts his hands on the sick so that they can be healed, serves the altar, offers Qurbana, and consecrates the baptismal water. Moreover, the priest's office is to instruct and enlighten the people. This thought, which is borrowed from Pseudo-Dionysius, is very rarely found among the East Syrian fathers. Babai the Great says: the

¹⁰⁹John3:22-23/Matthew26:26-28

¹¹⁰ Wilhelm De Vries, Der Nestorianismus, Theodors von Mopsuestia in seiner Sakramentenlehre, Orientalia Christina Periodica, Volumen VII, Roma 1941, 145.

bishop as bishop of the villages. *Liber Patrum* gives the same meaning of the term. According to this document, the Cor-bishop is commissioned to visit the villages. He is the vocal and assistant to the bishop. The details have no theological interest—only.¹¹⁸ In ancient times, the Cor-bishop was able to consecrate the lower ranks, including the reader, sub-deacon and covenant sons of the covenant through prayer of the laying on of hands (Blessing). This was because it was permitted for the Cor-bishop to consecrate the readers and sub-deacons in the villages, but they been prevented since the Council of Chalcedon. Abdišo also says that the Cor-bishop can select boys and employ them through prayer of laying on of hand in villages or monasteries. Here he transcribes ps.-Nicaea canons concerning the Cor-bishop, which state: “*He persuades some boys and daughters to sort out some of them for liturgical services through prayer of laying on of hands on them to be sons of the Covenant.*”¹¹⁹ In a sense, this indicates that the Cor-bishop could consecrate the Reader, Sub-deacon and the sons and daughters of the Covenant¹²⁰—whether men or women, dedicated in the service of the Eucharist and of the baptism of adults. However, the question arises whether the customs described here were still in practice in the 14th Century.

6. The Archdeacon-

The word Archdeacon comes from a Greek word consisting of two syllables. The first is in the sense of a president and the second in the meaning of deacons. Thus, the totality of the word means “head of deacons.” We find in the early church, but in the East Syriac Church, archdeacon being considered as the head of the service. He is the fourth grade of the hierarchy. Jesus Christ performed this function when he said to the disciples: *Keep away from pagan practices, and do not enter a Samaritan city; but above all, go to the sheep which are lost from the house of Israel.*¹²¹ The archdeacon corresponds to the angelic choir called the Dominions (). He represents a tongue of the bishop, at whose right hand he stands in all of the liturgical services. There is no laying on of hand in the rite of consecration. The archdeacon is marked on the forehead, using the usual formula. The archdeacon's office was mentioned by the Synod in 410 Canon 15, Canon 27 of Mar Aba in Canons in the Ibn al-Tayyib (Jurisprudence of Christianity),

¹¹⁸ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 136.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 124.

¹²⁰ They were an important part of early Syriac Christianity. It refers to a specific group of laity who has devoted themselves specifically to the church. The concept developed from the period before Aphrahat to the seventh century. It has various Biblical and Jewish sources. Before the advent of monasticism (which developed in the desert of Egypt), most Syriac churches would consist of a community focused around the sons of the covenant: men and women who had committed themselves to sexual abstinence and the service of the church. See: Braun O., *Das Buch des Synhados*. Stuttgart und Wien, 16.

¹²¹ see Matthew 10:5-6

Canon 28 and Išo'yahb I 585 Canon 19. Its functions are described here in detail. He is the bishop's right hand and leads the entire service. Every bishop must have an Archdeacon and he is able to complete all of the obligations to serve and administer within the Church. He shall be a tongue for the bishop and give order to priests and deacons to serve the altar. In the presence of the bishop, in the platform **ܩܘܪܬܐ**, Archdeacons must recite the proclaiming of deacons **ܩܘܪܬܐ**, and read the gospel. He distributes the baptism and the altar services every week to priests, deacons and subdeacons. He pays particular attention to the sanctuary and its decoration. He is considered a church lamp and a light in front of the bishop with his words and knowledge. It is appropriate for every bishop to have an archdeacon in his church, and if a lawsuit arises between the clerics, or between the clergy and the parishioners, he should hear them and judge them fairly.¹²² According to the Canons of the Išo Bar Nun, the archdeacon is authorized to act as an ecclesiastical judge.¹²³ The Anonymous Author mentions the Archdeacon very often. According to him he is like an angel who is placed above the priesthood. For *Liber Patrum*, Archdeacon is also called Visitor and he acts as secretary of the Patriarch. In the ordination sections, the archdeacon is granted the authority to sanctify the altar without oil.¹²⁴

7. The Bishop - **ܩܘܪܬܐ**

The apostolic succession is a direct lineage in history and dates back to the Twelve Apostles. It is the method whereby the ministry of the East Syrian Church is held to be derived from through the Apostles by a continuous succession. The succession has usually been associated with a claim that the succession is through a series of bishops. The bishop is regarded as worthy of attaining clergy for possessing full priesthood. The person who has been consecrated deacon, priest, and bishop is considered to have attained complete priesthood and thereby have been given the responsibility by Lord Christ to teach and service all sacraments.

The word for Bishop comes from the Greek word *apisqopa* and its meaning is seen from above or by a sergeant. He is the shepherd of the diocese who heads its priests and is responsible for the care of its people. He also ordains priests and deacons for his diocese. It is listed in the third rank from the top and parallels the choir of angels called Thrones. The Lord himself functioned as a bishop.¹²⁵ The bishop is called the head of the priests (**ܩܘܪܬܐ - ܩܘܪܬܐ**). Thus, we state that the bishop rank bears the fullness of the

¹²²Habbi, Synods, 72, 286, 380.

¹²³Sachau, Syrische Rechtsbücher II, 171 and 116.

¹²⁴ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 137.

¹²⁵ See Matthew28:18_John20:22-23

priesthood. For the ordination of the bishop, the Synod of 410 demanded at least three bishops be present. The Synod of 544 declares that the bishop, who is appointed by one or two bishops, is not validly ordained. And the choice must be made in the presence of the Metropolitan or at least on his behalf.¹²⁶ Here, we have no doubt the reason why several bishops and also the Metropolitan must cooperate for the ordination of a bishop. Whoever is elected as bishop should not depend on the wishes of just two bishops. The Metropolitan must also give his consent and he must be involved in the Ordination. In this regard, Išo'yahb III and Išo'dād of Merv confirmed that the Bishop can not to be Bishop without the presence of Metropolitan. Even throughout the history of Patriarchs and Mar Abdišo, it has been held that canonically at least three bishops are required for the consecration of the bishop.¹²⁷

The oldest description of the ordination of a bishop to the East Syrian Fathers can be found in the files of the Synod of 420 when the bishops gathered with the people in the Church of Christ in front of the altar. After reading the gospel by the main consecrator on the back of the ordinand¹²⁸ and the ordinand is not tonsured,¹²⁹ the ordained lays prostrate on the ground. Bishops put the gospel on his back¹³⁰ and they are all to stretch out their right hand over him and the main consecrator among them should say the prayer of laying on of hand. Here, we already have the essential elements of the consecration of the bishop as follow: laying the gospel by the bishops (or by archdeacon) on his back and then laying on of hands by the bishops with appropriate prayer while invoking the grace of the Holy Spirit. After the ordination, if a Metropolitan is the main consecrator, the new bishop must introduce himself to the patriarch in order to be confirmed by him.¹³¹ We already find this provision in Canon 1 of the Synod of 410: the bishop should go to be perfected by the Catholicos of Seleucia Ctesiphon. Therefore, his

¹²⁶ Habbi, Synods, 67, 280.

¹²⁷ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 132.

¹²⁸ It signifies the yoke of the proclamation of the Gospel.

¹²⁹ The ordinand previously was chosen from among the monks who already been tonsured when he received the monastic habit. The present "Manual of Canon Law" in our church is the Synod of Mar Abdišo, compiled from the canons of the old councils by a learned Bishop of Nisibis about 1300. He says that in his days, the ancient custom was to take Bishops from among monks.

¹³⁰ The Gospel mentions the presence of Christ through his Word which symbolizes his unseen hands. It is worth noting that Synod of Mar Isaac mentioned that Bishops put the Gospel on the head of the ordinand because in general, the laying on of hands is to be on the head. However, a ritual of the ordination reminds that it should be placed on the back. I think logically, it is reasonable to place it between head and back, which signify laying on of the invisible hand of Christ (on head) and the yoke of the proclamation of the Gospel (on back).

¹³¹ In the rite of confirmation-ܩܘܪܒܢܐ, there is no invocation of the Holy Spirit, but only a blessing. See: the rite of the ordination, 144.

Episcopal authority can only be exercised only after getting confirmation (ܐܘܬܘܪܝܬܐ) by the patriarch.¹³²

According to Abdišo, the confirmation of the new bishop has its role model. The apostles did not perform their ministry until after they obtained the Holy Spirit, through which they were confirmed. In the history of the patriarchs, it is said that the ordained must introduce himself to the patriarch before he is counted among the chiefs. The Patriarch gives him his blessing and the fullness of Episcopal authority. As for the bishop's powers, it has already been said that he can only ordain bishops in conjunction with the Metropolitan. It is also part of the office of the bishop to consecrate altars. The consecration of the altar is reserved for the bishop. According to the *Liber Patrum*, the bishop has two talents more than the priest: laying on of hands and the altar sanctification. The simple priest cannot perform the altar ordination with oil. Timothy II, the bishop, is reserved for the consecration of the oil for the consecration of the altar.¹³³

8. The Metropolitan-ܐܘܬܘܪܝܬܐ

The word Metropolitan comes from a Greek word consisting of two syllables. The first, meaning “mother” and the second meaning “city” or indicating a major, civil city (the owner of the mother city or the big city). The bishop is promoted to the rank of Metropolitan in relation to the major city on which he is drawn, or for the length of his service, piety, and experience. Dioceses are structured into ecclesiastical provinces under the jurisdiction of a Metropolitan. The Metropolitan is the second grade of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. He belongs to the highest rank of the three traditional orders in the category of bishops. This degree identifies to the angelic choir known as the Seraphim (ܐܘܪܘܫܝܡܐ). This office is served by the Lord when he was seen by his disciples on the sea of Tiberius after the resurrection.¹³⁴ According to Abdišo, at least three bishops should participate in the ordination of the Metropolitan and one of them must be the Patriarch who is the only one that can consecrate a Metropolitan. In the rite of the ordination, a rubric distinguishes whether the candidate is already a bishop or not. If he is not yet a bishop, he is ordained as one. Even if he is already a bishop, he only wears the priestly vestments at the beginning of the ordination and the bishops are only

¹³² This confirmation is the best proof of the authority that the Patriarch enjoys over his entire church, for he is the president and father, from whom all spiritual births are presidential, as the Council of Dadišo has made clear. This confirmation is the necessary complement in the main sacraments: Baptism, Eucharist, Liturgy, Penance, and Priestly-Episcopal ordinations. See Habbi, Synods, Canon 1, 67.

¹³³ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 132-133.

¹³⁴ See John21:15-18

consecrate the Patriarch. Even for Abdišo, six metropolitans are involved in the ordination of the Catholicos. Elsewhere he speaks of three metropolitans when deemed necessary. The rite of ordination is very similar to that of the Episcopal ordination. We also find here the laying on of hands and invocation of the Holy Spirit.¹³⁷ We do not find theoretical debates of East Syriac fathers on whether the patriarchal ordination is actually a new ordination or a mere ceremony, as they hardly distinguish between sacraments and sacramental ritual in general. The Liber Patrum states that the patriarch has five talents: one from diaconate, two from priesthood, and three that are bishopric. So there is no new authority mentioned beyond that of the bishops.¹³⁸

Conclusion

Much like a flower developing from a bud to full bloom, so too does the sacrament of Holy Orders unfold itself through three stages as it confers successively the powers of deacon, priest and bishop. We see in the Old Testament that the Priesthood was deeply rooted from the very beginning of the human races, the first period of biblical history, and the age of the patriarchs. It was the father of the family who was also the priest. It started with Adam, then Noah, Abraham and Moses in whose time God directed that the priesthood belonged to the family of Aaron of the tribe of Levi. When the old law ended with the establishment of the new covenant by Christ, the old law also came to an end. Hence, from the first Century, the early church traces ordained ministry back to the Apostles who were chosen by Jesus to follow him most closely and later to lead the community after he was gone. The Sacrament of Holy Orders is an important and essential part of the East Syrian doctrine because it shapes the Hierarchy of the Church. In the biblical aspect, the Holy orders consist of Deacons, Priests, and Bishops. However, at the beginning of the fifth century, the apostolic churches began to divide every order to three ranks for a broader administration of service inside the ecclesiastical system. They are the lowest grade consisting of the choirs of Angels, Archangels and Principalities. In the earthly Church, the similar ranks are reader, sub-deacons and deacons. The second grade of angels is comprised of Power, Authorities and Dominions. The ranks in church are priest, cor-bishop and archdeacon. The highest grade of angels consists of Thrones, Seraphim and Cherubim. The bishops, metropolitans and patriarch are parallel to this great grade of saintly being. Without the Holy Orders, the Church of the East would not have any leaders to direct and teach the laity community, which is why it plays such an influential part in the Church.

¹³⁷ The Rite of Ordination, 215.

¹³⁸ De Vries, Sakramentheologie, 130.