

considered worshipping it and that was after Emperor Leo III had issued a decree to destroy them due to his lack of understanding of how those Icons were used.

It is unfortunate that due to the political struggle that prevailed in the Mesopotamia, our church lost some of the ancient traditions in the deep-rooted history of the church of the East that existed and dealt with such as Icons and the design/Engineering of the church. The church of the East certainly utilized the Icons during the first centuries and it gradually developed until the advent of Islam, which forbade any kind of icons of saints because the Church of the East was included in the lands under the Islamic rule that opposed to use images of humans figures so they were obliged to remove their Icons.

One of the most common misunderstandings about the Church of the East is that it did not use Icons and this may sound normal and true among a lot of people because they did not see Icons in their churches and were told that the Church of the East declines them although all the other ancient Christian apostolic traditions included Icons so it is surprisingly odd to think of an apostolic church with no Icons.

But it is fair to say that honoring Icons in the Church of the East was never in a considerate level in compare to the Byzantine Church. This is because the history of the other apostolic churches witnessed different developments in the ritual aspect, especially the churches that were under the rule of the Roman Empire. This means that doctrine views and ritual worships regarding Icons differ from church to another.

In this article, I try to highlight some compelling evidence of the existence of icons based on two main sources of the Apostolic Church of the East, which are the Bible and the east-syriac Liturgy, and by passing through many historical textual evidence related to the use of icons that were written down by the church fathers, but before that let us dig in the depth of the Holy Bible, particularly the Old Testament.

THE ICONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

Some opponents, especially those with Protestant inclination does not accept the icons and pictures in church and they consider it against the second commandment in which the Lord says “You shall not make for yourself and idol or a likeness of anything in heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth, you shall not bow down before them or serve them” (Exodus 20:4-5) (Deuteronomy 5: 8, 9). And as we mentioned earlier, a war against Icons was waged in the eighth century AD from 726 AD during the reign of the Empire Leo III and lasted several centuries then it subsided then waged again in the Protestantism since the 15th and 16th centuries and lasted in their believes until now.

We have many evidences in the Bible; particularly in Torah, which confirmed that the people of God used statues. To clarify this confusion is that when God prohibited the icons and statues saying “you shall not bow down before them or serve them “is far from the purpose the icons are used for, as they are not used to be worshiped and this way the second commandment had not been broken. No doubt, this prohibition in the Ten Commandments was in an era when paganism spread, and there was fear for the believers from it, so that it was forbidden to carve any stone even in ordinary construction, and even in the construction of altars. So the spirit of the second commandment of the Ten Commandments is not to offer worship to anyone or anything other than God. Consequently, God does not allow us to make statues, because God is indefinite and unlimited with a time nor a place can tie Him, to yet this does not conflict with the church having pictures of saints to follow their steps and be spiritual examples of their great love for Christ.

God commanded Moses to make the Ark of covenant, and make golden cherubim on it saying: “and make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover. Make one cherub on one end and the second cherub on the other; make the cherubim of one piece with the cover at the two ends. The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking toward the cover place them on top of the ark and put in the ark the tablets of the covenant law that I will give you .there, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites”. (Exodus 25:17-22). There was not breaking of a commandment in the making of the Cherubim because the purpose of it was not to worship the angels represented by Cherubim. Solomon as well, following the same way in building the temple and decorating it: “in the inner sanctuary he made two cherubim of olivewood, each ten cubits high. Five cubits was the length of one wing of the cherub, and five cubits the length of the other wing of the cherub. It was ten cubits from the tip of one wing to the tip of the other.both cherubim had the same measure and the same form.He put the cherubim in the innermost part of the house .And the wings of the cherubim were spread out so that a wing of one touched the one wall.and he overlaid the cherubim with gold”(1 Kings 6:23-28).

Just like these two statues were completed as commanded by the Lord, same was the Copper snake made when God Himself commands Moses saying: “make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole, and it shall come to pass that every one that is bitten when he looketh upon it shall live” (Numbers 21:8) and so did Moses, and there was not breaking the 2nd commandment in that as our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us that this deed was a symbol of his holy cross as He said:” and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life”.(John 3:14). And it was not limited to these Cherubim, as the Bible says:” and he carved all the walls of

the house roundabout with carved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, within and without “(1 Kings 6:29) “the two doors also were of olive tree and he carved upon them carvings of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers and overlaid them with gold and” (1 Kings 6:32). See also (1 Kings 6:35) and this how it was the Lord’s house decorated and carved with pictures, images and statues and people still worship God not the pictures nor statues, they did not break the 2nd commandment.

So basically the 2nd commandment aimed to stop the infiltration of pagan worship among people. It prohibited the use of the icons as it was common for the Jews to convert to pagans due to the many in their surroundings which caused a mixture of worshipping the one true God and the pagan worship, and that what happened to King Solomon who married a pagan and influenced him to worship other Gods. Therefore, there was confusion between pagan worship and the worship of the living God. If it is used for any purpose other than worship, God did not forbid it. The aim here is that worship is for God alone in an era when idolatry was common, and we saw how the people of Israel strayed by worshipping the golden calf and drifting many times behind the worship of the idols of the surrounding nations, and all of this was forbidden by God.

Therefore, God did not prevent icons and statues except out of fear of them falling into pagan deviations. But when this fear fades, icons become an educational spiritual role as a universal language understood by every human being. Worshiping an image is one thing, and using it to remember its subject is another. That is why the drawings are used in churches as a means of education so that the illiterate and children at least can read them while looking at the walls, for those who cannot read the scriptures. We will also see this idea below among the fathers of the Church of the East.

The reason behind the claims that Icons were not used in the Church of East:

The evidence for the existence of icons in the East Syriac tradition is many and continued until the 14th century. The Church of the East does not use icons at the present time although it was present clearly in its ecclesiastical tradition. You may think if icons were part of the church architecture then how come we don't have any remaining churches to proof so and here comes the true fact behind that, it is the many persecutions the church of the East suffered from throughout the centuries where they were demolished, robbed and burned by the Mongols. There is a book (the acts of Martyrs) about the decorated churches and how they were demolished and persecuted by Bahram V in 422.² German archaeologists discovered in 1929 in a city called Seleucia-Ctesiphon, south of Baghdad, the seat of the Patriarch of the Church of the East in the early centuries. They found remains of a church goes back to the 6th century, some of the remaining was a plaster statue, and it was broken to multiple pieces yet they saw clearly it was of a male figure. Unfortunately, the statue head was broken so they were unable to determine if it was representing Jesus Christ or one of the saints.³

We can trace the usage of Icons in the Church of the East during the Mongol period. There were new discoveries of icons during that time. The fathers of the church of the East in the late 13th century and 14th century defended the value to Icons against Islam which was against icons as they did not differentiate Reverence from worship. However, Mongols after converting to Islam had forced to abandon the use of icons, since there was a massive persecution of Christians by the Mongol

² Braun, Oskar, *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer*, 1915, 164.

³ Reuther, *The German Excavation at Ctesiphon*, 1929, 450; Cassis, Marica, *Kokhe, cradle of the church of the east*, An archaeological and comparative study, 2002, 64, 66.

emperor of Persia 1295-1304. This emperor strongly opposed idolatry and considered it a great and unforgivable sin.⁴

There are other evidence of banning the use of the Icons and goes back to the Islamic culture which affected the church of the East standpoint regarding icons during the Islamic reign. The first general ban of icons did not take place in a Christian country, it happened in a Muslim country when the Khalifa Yazid II (720-724) prohibited religious paintings in 721 and he invoked this verse of the Islamic messenger Muhammad. Said Ibn Omar, may God be pleased with him: The messenger of God, said “those who make these images will be tormented in the day of Resurrection, It is said to them: Bring to life what you have created”.⁵ That is why after exactly five years; the Byzantine Emperor Leo III (717-741) started banning icons and issued a decree in 730 stating that. Although the decree issued by Caliph Yazid before that had an impact on the emperor's thought in destroying the statues, this was also due to political motives within Byzantium. . He wanted to ban the Icons of the weakened monks who had become too critical, and also used his influence to support the publication of portraits of the emperor in order to show the power of the state.⁶

In addition, there is a lot to say, especially from a Protestant point of view, which is totally untrue as it portrayed the church of the East as icon free. In the 19th century, the English missionaries arrived the mountains of Hakkari and met the Church of the East congregation and they were thrilled at the absence of icons, statues also religious paintings in their lives, they unexpectedly met people close to them in spirit and called the Nestorian, the Protestants of the East. When the author Grant arrived to Urmia in 1835 he said: “For the whole of the eighteen centuries, the Nestorian Christians

⁴ Laurence E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia*, 80.

⁵ صحیح البخاری، صفحة 2105; Herzfeld, Ernst, *Die Malereien von Samarra*.

⁶ Christoph Baumer, *the kirche des Ostens*, 165.

remained pure from the defilement of image-worship”.⁷ Even when the pictures were occasionally seen in our churches, Protestant missionaries saw it as innovation resulted from the impact of Rome.⁸

During the 19th century, Protestant missionaries who visited the Church of the East Christians mentioned that the churches they saw did not use icons or pictures. According to Grant,⁹ Southgate’s¹⁰ and Badger¹¹ who provided true notes about the absence of icons and pictures in the churches located in the mountains of Hakkari in east Turkey or the land around Urmia which are the lands on where they practiced all their missionary activities. Furthermore, Grant noted the complete absence of icons in their churches, which he considered further evidence of their influence on Jewish traditions that forbid images.¹² Fifty years after Grant’s death, the Chaldean Patriarch Abdisho I khayat (1895-1898) wrote a lengthy pastoral message in which he defended the holy Cross, the icons of Christ and saints. His message was addressed against the Protestants and aimed to convince the East Syriac Christians that respecting the icons was not a Catholic innovation and it never meant worshiping idols as the protestant missionaries thought, but it was based on the ancient and great traditions of the Church of the East.¹³

Let us explore in depth, the historical and ritual contexts of the Church of the East traditions which demonstrated value and respect for Icons till the 14th century through the fathers of the church of the East.

⁷ Grant, Ashel, *The Nestorian or the lost Tribes*, 1841, p. 6, 205f, 309; Perkin, Justin, *A Residence of Eight years in Persia among the Nestorian Christians*, 1843, 20f.

⁸ O.H. Parry, *The ancient Syrian church in Mesopotamia*, London: Syrian Patriarchate Education Society, 1892, 34.

⁹ Asahel Grant, *the Nestorians, or the lost Tribes*, Amsterdam, 1973. On Grant, see P.Kawerau, *Amerika und die orientalischen Kirchen. Ursprung und Umfang der amerikanischen Mission unter den Nationalkirchen Westasiens*, *Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte* 31, Berlin, 1958. 233-254.

¹⁰ Horatio Southgate, *Narrative of a visit to the Syrian church of Mesopotamia with statement and reflections upon the Present of Christianity in Turkey*, New York, 1856, 54.

¹¹ George Percy Badger, *the Nestorians and their Rituals with the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Kurdistan*, vol 2, London, 1852.

¹² Asahel Grant, *Die Nestorianer oder Die zehn Stämme*, Freiburg, 2006. 62.

¹³ E. Delly, *Le culte des saints images dans l'Eglise syrienne orientale*, *Orient Syrien* 1, 1956, 291-296.

Proofs of the existence of icons in the tradition of the Church of the East:

1. The Doctrine of Addai:

It is a Syriac text that goes back to the 4th and 5th century, it contains mostly of what the Historian Eusebius of Caesarea talked about. Historically, it had been proved that the documents from Edessa were the essence of all and then came Eusebius in the middle of the 4th century where he started talking about it. This text was interrelated to several stories; one of them was the story of the veil on which the picture of the Christ was imprinted.¹⁴ The story of the (Mandyllion) is one of the oldest East Syriac evidence which added legitimacy to the veneration of icons in our churches. According to the Christian traditions, the icon from Edessa consisted of a piece of cloth on which the face of Jesus was imprinted, it is the first Icon ever and it is generally referred by the name of Mandyllion.

The first version about the history of church was found at Eusebius of Caesarea, he recorded it in the beginnings of the 4th century. It is worth mentioning that Abgar, the king of Edessa sent a message with Hanania, the post man, to Jesus asking him to come and heal him but Abgar's request was declined by Jesus who turned down his invitation but promised him that after his Ascension, would send one of his disciples to heal him. It had been said that one of the seventy disciples, Thaddaeus (St. Addai) from Edessa, came to Edessa and put his hand on King Abgar and he was healed from his sickness in the name of the Jesus. Abgar marveled at his recovery from the disease of kings. However, he regretted a lot because he did not see Christ, which prompted him to choose skilled painters and order them to go and draw a picture of the Lord and bring him to rejoice in it, as if through it he would meet Christ himself.

¹⁴A. Harrak, "The Acts of Mar Mari the Apostle", Writings from the Greco-Roman World II (Atlanta, 2005) found in Die Welt der Gotterbilder, ed. B Groneberd & H Spieckermann, 327; The Father Alber Abuna, History of the Church of the east, Baghdad 1985, in Arabic, تاريخ كنيسة الشرقىة، الاب البير ابونا، 11-9.

And when the two artists arrived, they were unable to draw Christ in his human splendor. And when the Lord saw their helplessness and knew what was in Abgar's heart of the intense desire to see him, he took the kerchief and placed it on his face, so the image of his holy face was imprinted on it, and he gave it to the postman named Hanania. Then he returned with the veil to Abgar. When Abgar the King saw the icon, he received it with great joy and placed it with great honor in one of his luxurious mansion.¹⁵

Chronicle tells later that because of the return of Abgar's successors to paganism, the bishop took the veil and stored it inside a wall of a church in the city of Edessa and placed a lamp in front of it. The thinker and writer Evagrius Scholasticus, in his book Ecclesiastical History in the sixth century, was the first to talk about the role of the icon in easing the siege. It was mentioned that the bishop of Edessa used the fire in which the oil flowing from the image was poured to destroy and ease the siege of the Persians.¹⁶ Then, the icon was transported to Constantinople in the 10th century. The veil disappeared when Constantinople fell in 1204 during the fourth crusade. Some believe that it appeared again as a piece of inheritance in the belongings of King Louis IX in saint Chapel in Paris, France and it disappeared again during the French Revolution.¹⁷

¹⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea. Epistle of Jesus Christ to Abgarus King of Edessa, Church History, Book I Chapter 13; G. BARDY, Eusèbe de Cesaree, Histoire ecclésiastique, vol. 1, book 1, 13, 1-22. This story is mentioned also in Syriac text called the "Doctrine of Addai" from the second half of the 4th century. This text adds that a portrait of Jesus painted purportedly by the court painter Hannan during his visit to Jesus, see Doctrine of Addai, 1-6.

Doctrine of Addai, 13. BEDJAN, Acta Martyrum, 48; S. Brock, "Transformation of the Edessa portrait of Christ," Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies 18:1 (2004), 48. HARRAK, the acts of Mar Mari, 4-5.

See more: The father Alber Abuna, the martyrs of the East, in Arabic, شهداء المشرق, 2-5; Biography of the Saints – *سيرة الشهداء*, 48.

¹⁶ Kitzinger, Ernst, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 8, (1954), 83–150.

¹⁷ Two documentary inventories: year 1534 (Gerard of St. Quentin de l'Isle, Paris) and year 1740. See Grove Dictionary of Art, Steven Runciman, Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa, *Cambridge Historical Journal* 1931, and Shroud.com for a list of the group of relics. See also an image of the Gothic reliquary dating from the 13th century, in *Histor.ws* Archived 2012-02-07 at the Wayback Machine.

2. The Acts of St. Mari¹⁸:

St. Mari's Acts are based on the teachings of St. Addai, it is telling the history of Christians in Mesopotamia in general and the area surrounding the capital of the Persian Empire, in particular Seleucia-Ctesiphon mid Iraq. We find in Mar Mari's works the same story that included the correspondence between King Abgar the black and the Christ and the story of the Mandylion as was mentioned in the book of Addai's teachings.¹⁹ There is another proof obtained from the Syriac translation of the church history belongs to an author named Eusebius (7:17) in the acts of Mar Mari(first part) in which he describes a copper statue of a woman, it refers to the woman who was bleeding for twelve years as mentioned in the Bible(Mark 5:25-34). The statue was described to be made out of copper, placed on a big rock where a woman knelt and spread her arms in the form of supplication, and there was a man in front of her wearing a cloak stretching his hand toward her, this statue referred to the Savior.²⁰

Also tells Mari, the son of Shlemon, the author of (اخبار بطاركة المشرق), that when Mar Mari arrived to Destemsian at the Persian Gulf, he preached Christian teachings there and draw in the church a picture of the virgin Mary, to enlighten the hearts of the believers by seeing her, this is similar to what Christ did with King Abgar when he

¹⁸ Mar Mary's Acts are Syriac Acts. It talks about the introduction of Christianity in northern and southern Mesopotamia by a student of Mar Addai and Mar Mari in the first and beginning of the second century AD. It was written in the sixth century.

See: Harrak, Amir (2005). The Acts of Mār Mārī the Apostle.

¹⁹ A. Harrak, "The Acts of Mar Mari the Apostle", Writings from the Greco-Roman World II, Atlanta, 2005, found in Die Welt der Gotterbilder, ed. B Groneberd & H Spieckermann, 327.

²⁰ Harrak, Amir, the acts of Mar Mari, 2005, 21. BEDJAN, Acta Martyrum, 45-46; S. Brock, "Transformation of the Edessa portrait of Christ," Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies 18:1 (2004), 48.

See more: Alber Abuna, the martyrs of the East, in Arabic, شهداء المشرق, 2. الاب البير ابونا,

sent him the Mandylion with his picture on it.²¹ Etheridge was another writer who referred to the history of Mar Mari that they also draw Virgin Mary and the Saints.²²

3. Bar Khadbshaba Arabaya: (ends of 6th century-beginnings of 7th)

He was a priest and a teacher in the School of Nisibis, he brought up in his book about the history of the fathers and saints prosecuted for the truth, he referred to the existence of the icon of the lord ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ. Where he says that when you stand to lit a candle (so you can start your prayer) you recite five Marmyatha (ܡܪܡܝܬܐ) in front of the icon then you greet the cross. This is a clear evidence of the existence of the icon of the lord in the end of the 6th century.²³ Also patriarch Khayyat found a passing reference that the pictures of saints were mentioned in the acts of Bar khadbshaba.²⁴

4. Mar Sahdona-ܡܪ ܫܗܕܘܢܐ:

Mar Sahdona was the Metropolitan of Beth Garmai in the seventh century. We have a short reference of his previous testimony about the veneration the Edessa - Mandylion. It is found in the collection of letters written in Syriac language, which written by Catholicos Ishoyahb III .It is worth mentioning that the Christ icon was placed next to the Cross.²⁵

²¹ See more: Mary Ibn Sulaiman, News of the Patriarchs of the church of the east from the Book of Majdal, Great Rome, 1899, in Arabic,, رومية الكبرى، من كتاب المجدل، 4. ماري بن سليمان، اخبار فطاركة كرشي المشرق من كتاب المجدل، رومية الكبرى.

²² ETHERIDGE, The Syrian Churches, 111.

²³ François Nau, Barkhadbeshabba Arbaia. Histoire ecclesiastique (II partie), Patrologia Orientalis IX.5, Turnhout, 1971, 624.

²⁴ Delly, Le culte, 294-295.

²⁵ M. Fiey, Isoyaw le Grand, OCP 35-2, 305-333,361.

5. Gebriel Qatraya and Ibrahim Bar-Levi:

One of the greatest interpreters of the East Syriac Liturgy is Gabriel Qatraya, he is the author of the Explanation of Liturgy that was written in the beginnings of the 7th century. It was divided into five Memra, the subject of the last Memra was about the Holy Eucharist, and in which he said the following: “sanctification of holy sacraments can’t be fulfilled without the presence of the Holy Cross, the Holy Bible and the Icon of our lord”.²⁶ According to him, the Icon of the Christ is a liturgical necessity alongside the Holy Cross and the Bible. The text speaks for itself, the presence of the icon alongside the Cross and Bible was a necessary condition to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Furthermore, we have another testimony from the 7th century for the usage of images in the church of the East by Abraham Bar Levi. In his commentary on the Mass, he writes that it is prohibited to sanctify the Mysteries without the presence of the icon of Christ in the Holy of Holies. According to Abraham Bar Levi, the Cross, the Gospel and the Icon of Christ fill the place of the person of our Lord. Therefore, the icon of Christ is a liturgical imperative with the Cross and the Gospel Book.²⁷

6. The Liturgy of the Church of the East:


In the Liturgical Texts of the church of the East, there are denoting signals about the presence of the icons both in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Baptism. The rite of consecration of the Altar contains some instructions about specific items that must be present on the altar and icon is one of them and it is mentioned in the rite of consecration of the altar.

²⁶ Sebastian. Brock, Gabriel of Qatar commentary on the liturgy, section 45 Hugoye 6, 2, 2003; GABRIEL QATRAYA, 95.

²⁷ Anonymi auctoris expositio officiorum Ecclesiae, Georgia Arbelensi vulgo adscripta, II. Accedit Abrahæ bar Upheh interpretatio officiorum, ed. R.H. Connolly (CSCO 76 (Syr. 32), 1915), 161. For references to images of saints, see E. Delly, 'Le culte des saintes images dans l'église syrienne orientale', L'Orient Syrien, 1 (1956), 291-296; Richard Hugh Connolly, Anonymi auctoris exposition officiorum Ecclesiae, Goergio Arbelensi vulgo adscripta; accredit abrahæ bar Lipeh interpretation officiorum, CSCO 72, Paris-Leipzig, 1913, 161, 175.

See more: 73 تفسير الخدم، تاليف مار ابراهيم برليفه، ترجمة الاب اميل سمعون (حالياً اسقف) والاب ماهر كورنيل،

10. The Dictionary of Hasan Ibn-Al Bahlul:

In the Syriac-Arabic dictionary that was composed by the east syriac linguist and lexicographer Hasan Ibn Albahlul in the 10th century we come across the word ³⁴ (shrine, statue, and temple) along with the following additions: dome and image as for the image of saint Virgin Mary and other images. This paragraph confirms that the Church of the East had pictures of Virgin Mary.³⁵

11. Catholicos Mar Elia II (1131-1111):

Patriarch Elia II is the author of a very important theological article, written in Arabic, stored under the name (Origin of Religion).The fifth chapter talks about the Holy cross on and the finding of the remains of it, it also contains some notes related to the veneration of icons which we find in the following paragraph: ” pictures take the place of writing in Churches, and writings are different from one language to another. We use pictures in churches to work as language especially to those who do not know how to read or write, like kids or the illiterates. For example, if someone looks at a picture and meditate about it he would no longer need to ask question about the subject of it like the person who does not know how to read and ask someone else to read for him. And pictures in this matter have a preference more than anything else. Therefore, we venerate, accept and honor images, and it is all based on respect. Honoring them, kissing them and venerating them come in place of the honor pushed by our Muslim friends to copy their holy books. Kissing the icon is like talking to the people represented in the pictures”.³⁶

³⁴ See Mar Toma Odo Dictionary, 327.

³⁵ R. Duval, *Lexion syriacum auctore Hassano Bar Bahlule II*, Paris, 1901, 1426.

³⁶ G. Giannazza, *Elie II. Kitab usul al-Din*, vol 2, 311-314.

In this paragraph, the Catholicos Mar Elia II confirmed that having pictures in churches is as Bible for the poor. At that time, Muslims were upset at the practice of icons, so he clearly explained to them what the purpose behind icons is by referring to the way the Muslims venerate their Quran when they copy it. More than other east syriac authors, he confirms that the images of saints reflect a real presence.

12. Hunain Ibn Isaac (808-873)

There is also another narration concerning a famous incident in the life of the Arab Hunain Ibn Isaac of Hirah, the chief physician of the court of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil. At that time, the people of the Church of the East were undoubtedly accustomed to pictures. In the year 854 some people who were jealous of Hunain conspired against him where they accused him in the presence of the Patriarch and Caliph al-Mutawakkil by being the rest of the Christians, and idol worshiper as he gave authorization to make an icon of the Virgin Mary, as a proof of validation of their accusation they asked him to spit on the icon. But the Muslim caliph, whose religion included a strict ban on images,³⁷ was not expected. This behavior made him so disturbed by this disbelief that he ordered that Hunain be thrown into prison and all his wealth and his private library be confiscated. So the patriarch banned him. After six months of imprisonment, Hunain, the caliph became seriously ill, when he saw Christ in a dream at night, and ordered him to release Hunain, as he would then heal

³⁷ Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) in the ninth century during the rule of Caliph al-Mutawakkil forbade the use of images. The evidence for this in the Islamic hadith book is the narrations of the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad that developed in the eighth century, in their condemnation of art and painters. The idea that Muslims should not create idols or imitate God's work in creating a living thing. We read in Sahih al-Bukhari on the hadith of Aisha: "She bought a rug (cushion) with pictures on it, and when the Messenger of God, may God's prayers and peace be upon him, saw it, he stood at the door and did not enter, and I recognized hatred on his face, so she said: O Messenger of God: I repent to God and to His Messenger. What have I sinned? He said: "What is the matter with this sheet?" She said: I bought it for you to sit on and recline on, so the Messenger of God, may God's prayers and peace be upon him, said: "The owners of these pictures are being tortured and they are told: Bring to life what you have created." Then he said: "A house in which there are pictures is not Angels enter it.

him. So Al-Mutawakkil set him free, and then returned to him his properties and his valuable library.³⁸

Also, Bar Hebraeus (1226-1228) in his book on the history of the Church confirms and testifies to the use of images in the Church of the East. Bar Hebraeus explains Patriarch Mar Theodosius' veneration of icons when the Patriarch rebukes those who do not respect them. Patriarch Theodosius I (853-858) talks about the attitude of the Church of the East towards icons, when he explained to al-Mutawakkil that when a learned person spits on an icon, he deserves punishment because he "spits not on the image, but on Christ and Mary." He apparently believed icons to be the instruments of the "true presence" of Christ or the saints, and thus worthy of respect and esteem.³⁹ End of story Hunain is imprisoned and his wealth is confiscated. The caliph regretted his decision and reinstated him. There are also other references related to Hunain icons. It is mentioned that Christians decorate their churches with paintings to attract the attention of visitors.⁴⁰

13. The Patriarch Mar Dinkha I (1265-1281)

We have another reference written by unknown author which Paul Bedjan relates to a monk named Yokhanna in which he praises the Catholicos Patriarch Mar Dinkha I who was Metropolitan to the parish of Erbil when the church was built. The monk confirmed in his writings that the patriarch built a magnificent church in the Citadel of Erbil and spent a lot of gold and silver beyond his capability. However, it was adorned with beautiful things and also with pictures that embody the complete dispensation of our Lord Jesus from his birth to his ascension.⁴¹ He talked about the

³⁸ Yousif, Ephrem-Isa, *Les Philosophes et Traducteurs Syriaques*, 1997, 104f.

³⁹ BAR HEBRAEUS, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum III*, cols 197-199.

⁴⁰ Jean Baptiste. Abbeloos and Thomas. Lamy, *Gregorii Bar Hebraei Chronicon ecclesiasticum, III*. Louvain, 1877, col. 197-199.

⁴¹ Paul. Bedjan, "Memra de Mar Dcnha, Qatoliqa Patriarkis d-Madnha", in *Histoire de Mar .labalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d'un pretre et de deux lai'ques nestoriens* (Paris, Leipzig, 1985), 338.

purpose of icons in churches clearly has an educational and influential role as it takes the place of the Holy Bible to those who are poor or illiterate. He clearly shares the same input about the purpose of icons same as Catholicos Mar Elia II and Metropolitan Eshoo Bar Malkon.

14. Isho Bar Malkon (Deceased in 1258):

He was the Bishop of the City of Mardin under the name, Joseph, in the first quarter of the 13th century then he was transferred to the city of Nisibis and took the name Ishoyahb. He had several theological essays written in Arabic language one of them was an article against the Jews and Muslims as they accused Christians of worshiping idols and condemned for venerating the holy cross and the icons of the lord, Virgin Mary and the saints. It is clear that his writings are bare witness to the fact of existence of the icons and using them, and he also explained the way they were used in worship. He distinguishes between veneration and worship and shows that the veneration of the icon was meant only as a tribute to the Lord who was depicted through it, just as one might kiss the hem of a king's robe, or the carpet that was before his throne. According to his article, the church of the East did not only preserve the Cross but also the icons of the lord, Virgin Mary and the saints.

He said: “we kiss the graves of the martyrs, and we take mud, dust and stones as a reverence for those who are buried there, same for the icons of the lord, Virgin Mary and the saints as well. Mar Mari the Apostle was the first who put the icon of the lord and Virgin Mary and the charters of the law in church. He adopted the work of our lord, who sent a Mandylion embroidered with his personality to King Abgar of Edessa. The pictures in the holy places work as writings for those who do not know how to read like kids and illiterate as at the sight of it there would be no questions raised or doubts occurred about the idea they represented. God said to Moses:” You shall make two cherubim of gold, make them of hammered work at the two ends of

the mercy seat”(Exodus 25:18-20).Since God commanded to make statues in the old plan (the Law)then how suitable is it that the images should be in the new dispensation.⁴² In this text, Isho Bar Malkon confirms that Mar Mari was the first who started using icons in church and he quoted from the Exodus 18:25 where God commanded Moses to make the statues and this is an affirmation of the fact that veneration is based on intention not on the material.

15. Patriarch Mar Yahbalaha (1281-1317)

His origin was Mongolian, after his ordination to the rank of Metropolitan he had a dream that he entered the church and there were pictures of the holy Cross and saints, which means it was normal at that time: ”one night while he was asleep, Mar Yahbalaha had a dream, entering a big church and there were pictures of saints(ܟܪܝܫܬܐ) and among them there was a cross”.⁴³

16. Priest Saliba Ibn Yokhnana:

He was a priest lived in Cyprus during the 14th century, and an author of several theological articles, he wrote about the Sacraments and named it (the books of Sacraments) which contained a lot of important historical documents which was not mentioned in the book of Al-Majdal. The books of Sacraments starts with a very interesting article called (the letter of evidence and guidance to love), Where the author tries to show that the Church of the East deserves better than the traditional condemnations of heresy uttered by the Church of Rome, which at this period, in the aftermath of the Crusaders, was very present in Cyprus, where the author tried to explain that the Church of the East deserves better than what it had been accused of such as heresy mainly brought up by the Church of Rome which at that time was very

⁴² Paul Sbath, vingt traits philosophiques et apologetiques d auteurs arabes chretiens du IXe an XIVe siècle, Le Caire, 1929, 161.

⁴³ Paul, Bedjan, Histoire de Mar Jab-alaha, patriarche et de Raban Sauma, Paris-Leipzig, 1895, 29-30.

present in Cyprus. This article, referred to the veneration of the icons as he said: “among them (the enemies of the Church of the East) who claim that we resent our pure Virgin Mary and we deny her and never mention her in our prayers and don’t have her icon in our churches”.⁴⁴

In the same book (the books of sacraments) Saliba goes back to the same subject and explains the meaning of veneration of icons in more details: ” as some people live in remote placed and cannot come to their graves or to the places where their bodies are preserved because of the uninhabited and wild mountains, they portrayed of themselves and write Under each image they write miracles known to have been performed by the person (depicted on the icon). It was the Christ himself who allowed and authorized it when king Abgar of Edessa sent a messenger to ask Jesus to come and heal him from his sickness. But (Jesus) wrote to him that it was impossible for him to go, but told him that he would send one of his disciples, who would cure him of his illness. And he took a handkerchief and wiped his face with it, engraving his image on the Mandylion, showing his embodied features, and sent it to King Abgar. And with the passage of time, miracles and signs were revealed through this image, which trustworthy correspondents spread the word in all languages. Same way, there was the woman who bled for years and spent all her money on doctors and cures but in vain until once while she was among the crowd and touched the hem of Christ’s robe and she healed (Mark 5:25-29).Two copper statues were made, one of them was of her image and the other was of the Christ, our lord”.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Gianmaria Gianazzan, *Traite de la demonstration et de la direction, Kitab al burhan wal irshad de Saliba ibn Zakhana*, *Parole d L Orient* 22, 1997, 567-629.

⁴⁵ Assemani, *Bibliotheca orientalis* III.2, 353.

Regardless of the Edessa Mandylion and the statue of Christ in Philippi's Caesarea, the text of Father Saliba confirms the common usage of the icons in the church of the east during his time, as it portrays the holy Bible for the illiterate people, But, on the other hand, it brings people by commemorating the saints in times of need to perform good deeds acceptable to God.

17. Catholicos Mar Sabreesho (the 6th century):

It had been mentioned that Chosrow, the king of Persians sent envoys to the king of Rome (Maurice) and as much they told him about the deeds of Mar Sabrisho he grew eager to meet him, he sent artists to portray his picture and one of his messengers as well and told him: "go and prostrate at the presence of the saint Mar Sabrisho the patriarch of Persia and portray his image accurately". But the saint refused and refrained from that for he was too humble and felt unworthy to be portrayed. The king Chosrow insisted on that for the good relation he had with the king of Rome Maurice, the artist started what he was told. When King Maurice invited his people those who had met the saint before, the king asked them who this portrait belongs to?" they replied with awe" as if Mar Sabrisho the Catholicos who is in the Persian Kingdome had come among us".⁴⁶

18. The Church of the East in China:

Later on, scientists discovered new evidences proved that the Christians of the church of the East used icons throughout their history especially when they settled in the remote areas of mid Asia and China.⁴⁷ There are several references to these icons in the letter to the king of Cyprus written by the Armenian who was the ambassador of the great Khan in 1288 in Samarkand. This letter mentioned that there was a local

⁴⁶ The history of the Nestorians: Chronicle Sert, Part 2, in Arabic, 114.

⁴⁷ For East Syriac discoveries see, for example, A. von le Coq, Buried treasures of Chinese Turkestan, London, 1928; A. Stein, On ancient Central-Asian tracks, London: Macmillan, 193.

church in the region of Tatars, of which the church of the East heralded. The text included: the people of this land are Christians, I had been in their churches, seen the pictures of Jesus Christ and the Magi Kings.⁴⁸ In addition, similar observations were made by Western European travelers to the Mongol court about the presence of images in the Church of the East.⁴⁹

John of Cora, a Latin Bishop of Sultaniyya in Persia, wrote about the church of the East in 1330 in Khan Baliq (Beijing) saying they had beautiful churches, decorated and had Crosses and pictures of saints”.⁵⁰ There was also an engraved imperial decree issued in 638 and had the following text:” arrived from afar, Alopen, the bishop of the kingdom of Ta-Ch'in, holding his books and pictures to present it in the reverend Capital”.⁵¹ The text is clearly confirming the Nestorian Bishop Alopen holding religious books and paintings when arrived to Shenzhen that was an early evidence of the use of icons in the Church of the East.

Albert Van le Gogh discovered the three wall arts in 1905 in North West China. These wall arts were part of the Church of the East that goes back to the 7th and 8th centuries. It portrays a priest blessing three believers, a crippled man and a knight holding in his right hand a scepter with a cross on top, the cross was also printed on his helmet.⁵²

⁴⁸ Chronicle of the Constable Smpad: see W. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol invasion*, fourth edition, London, 1977, 485; Etheridge, *The Syrian Churches*, 112.

⁴⁹ Mingana, 'The early spread of Christianity', 316.

⁵⁰ Book of the estate of the Great Kaan: see A.C. Moule, *Christians in China before the year 1550* (London: SPCK, 1930), 251.

⁵¹ Saeki, *Nestorian monument*, p. 166; Moule, A.C., *Christians in China before the year 1500*, 1973, 39.

⁵² Gründel, Albert, *Altbuddhistische Kultstätten in Chinesisch-Turkistan*, 1912, 339.

19. The Nestorian Church in Cyprus:

It was found also that a church built mid-14th century. The history of the church testifies to the existence of a community of Nestorian Traders in Famagusta at that time. It describes the church's Engineering, which is decorated with inscriptions in the Syriac language linked to the wall paintings inside the church around the year 1359. Until this day, it is possible to see the fracture of the Nestorian wall arts in the Nave.⁵³

20. The Liturgical written Manuscripts:

There are a lot of proofs of the existence of pictures in the Liturgical written (by-hand) manuscripts especially in the book of (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ) and other Liturgical books.⁵⁴

THE CONCLUSION

From a liturgical point of view, the Church of the East not only respects and venerates the icons, it even considers it equal to The Holy Cross and the Bible and this makes Icons one of the most loved and precious things in the Assyrian Church, not just a secondary worship. The Liturgy of the Church of the East and the father's commentaries express the Christological point of view in three things on the altar: firstly, the Bible which is the holy word of God, secondly comes the cross is the through which we glorify God as it is the symbol of our salvation and thirdly is the icon of Christ which is a proof of his human nature in which the word of God dwelt (the Mystery of the incarnation). Icons are in each apostolic tradition, both Eastern and Western, it is not just a local practice, but it is part of "the tradition of the apostolic catholic church". I think that the Eastern churches used icons less than the Western Byzantine world and each icon was considered sacred because of the generations venerated it. After the 14th century, the church of the East went through

⁵³ Dauvillier, Jean, Les Provence Chaldeennes, 1948, 275.

⁵⁴ See the Library of the Manuscripts of the Church of the East in Baghdad under the supervision of His Holiness Patriarch Mar Giwargis III.

a deep sleep and long silence till the 19th century. There is not easy to justify this long time of dullness but most likely was due to poverty, isolation, the lack of the theological schools and the distance from the advanced educational centers, especially after the sixteenth century, the poor situation of the Middle East under Ottoman control was an important factor in the absence and prohibition of the use of icons. Throughout the church history, veneration of icons was a subject of discussion between Christians and Muslims in the middle-East Countries as was mentioned earlier. One of the topics in this discussion is the comparison between veneration of icons and the Islamic practice of worship and emphasizing that what matters is the good faithful intention behind venerating the icons, it is directed to the figure it represents no to the material it was made. The role of icons was not liturgical only, but also were personal piety: it was a follow the steps of that character as it connects the believer to the figure represented in the icon and encourage them to do their deeds. We can be sure that religious icons existed in the history of the Church of the East, it was a part of its civilization alongside the books and religion documentations that we inherited from our forefathers and it is remaining till this day. They were not just paintings to decorate the church, it had and still has a deep spiritual influence on the believers while praying and prostrating to God in a simplified way a human can perceive. In the end, my personal input on the use of icons is as this ,in the meantime it is not supposed to allow icons inside Church during liturgy, although it was realistically on the altar according to the book of Liturgy and the explanations of the fathers of the church of the east, but we still can use at least the pictures of the saints in the halls, classrooms, offices, the windows of churches or in the church yards as a gesture of veneration and reverence from the believers as it applies a spiritual atmosphere in the church which helps the believer to have more reverence, awe and modesty in the house of God.