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**THE LETTER OF PATRIARCH JOHN II OF ANTIOCH (631–648)  
TO MARUTHA OF TAGRIT AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE  
FOR THE HISTORY OF THE IBERIAN CHURCH**

**Abstract**

Patriarch John II of Antioch (631–648) was the head of the Syriac Orthodox Church. He was one of the most distinguished figures of the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the faithful venerate him as a saint within this tradition. Of particular interest and importance for the history of the Georgian Church is the letter of John of Antioch to Marutha, Metropolitan of Tagrit (628/629–649) and head of the Syriac Orthodox Church of the East. This epistle holds special significance, as it represents one of the earliest extant sources testifying to the subordination of the Iberian Church to the patriarchal see of Antioch.

Georgian historians have long been aware of this letter and have utilized it in their studies concerning the original canonical status of the Iberian Church, as well as questions of its autocephaly. Unfortunately, however, to this day, the letter has not been subjected to a dedicated and detailed investigation in relation to the history of the Georgian Church.

In the present article, I have sought to fill this scholarly gap. The study examines the time and circumstances in which the letter was composed, its purpose, and its reliability. For the first time in Georgian scholarship, we publish here the complete Georgian translation of the correspondence between Patriarch John II of Antioch and Marutha of Tagrit, accompanied by relevant commentary.

**Keywords:** *John II of Antioch, Michael the Syrian, the Iberian Church, Autocephaly*

Patriarch John II of Antioch (631–648) was the head of the Syriac Orthodox Church. He was one of the most distinguished figures of the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the faithful venerate him as a saint within this tradition. At his behest, the Gospels were translated from Syriac into Arabic by skilled Christian Orthodox Arab translators around 643, but this translation did not come down to us. John also composed supplicatory prayers known as the *sedros* or *husoyos*, which he incorporated into church rituals. He has also drawn a liturgy, a homily on the consecration of the Chrism and a letter to Marutha, Metropolitan of Tagrit, which he wrote at the beginning of his patriarchate.

Of particular interest and importance for the history of the Georgian Church is the letter of John of Antioch to Marutha of Tagrit (628/629–649). This epistle holds special significance, as it represents one of the earliest extant sources testifying to the subordination of the Iberian Church of to the patriarchal see of Antioch.

Georgian historians have long been aware of this letter and have utilized it in their studies concerning the original canonical status of the Iberian Church of Kartli, as well as questions of its autocephaly. Unfortunately, however, to this day, the letter has not been

subjected to a dedicated and detailed investigation in relation to the history of the Georgian Church.

The letter of Patriarch John has not survived as an independent document; instead, it has been preserved within the Chronicle of Michael the Syrian, the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch (1166–1199). Michael the Syrian (ca. 1126–1199) served as Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church from 1166 to 1199. He is the author of a chronicle which is the most extensive work ever composed in the Syriac language, covering the period from the Creation of the world up to the year 1195.

For a long time, the chronicle of Michael the Syrian was unknown. Michael the Great was only known as a writer of legal, liturgical and some lesser hagiographic texts. The scholarly investigation of the chronicle and its content began when some Armenian versions of the chronicle reached European libraries during the first half of the 19th century. Parts of them were translated into French and published by Édouard Dulaurier. In 1868, a complete French translation of one of these Armenian versions was published by Victor Langlois. Langlois also started a philological investigation of historical sources and of the value of the text. The publication of two Armenian versions followed in 1870 and 1871.

In 1889 the Italian Orientalist Ignace Guidi voiced his high expectations about the original text and his hope to see it published as soon as possible. He also identified the bishop of Edessa – later to become the Syrian Catholic Patriarch Ignace II Rahmani - as the scholar responsible for this “discovery”. Rahmani had been bishop of Edessa since 1887. The copy he found in the Syrian-Orthodox church of St. Peter and Paul in Edessa had been prepared by Michael bar Barsaumo in 1598, and it was based on an earlier copy version prepared by Moses of Mardin.

Jean-Baptiste Chabot took the project in hand. He traveled to Edessa during a missionary journey, obtained a copy of the manuscript himself and began to publish it. During the publication of the Syriac original, Arabic translations became known or were acquired by European libraries. While none of these have been published, they have, however, been used by Chabot as a corroboration of the Syriac text in his translation and commentary.

As far as we know, *The Edessa-Aleppo Syriac Codex of the Chronicle of Michael the Great* is the only surviving copy of Michael’s Chronicle. The Edessa-Aleppo Codex of the Chronicle of Michael the Great found its way into the Syrian Church of Edessa (present-day Urfa in Turkey). How it got there, no one knows. What is known is that it was finally taken to Aleppo by the Syrian congregation, which was forcibly evicted in 1924 by the Turkish government, and deposited at the Church of St. Jirjis (George). It remained under lock until 2009, when the present Metropolitan Mor Gregorius Yuhanna Ibrahim of Aleppo decided to make it public. It was printed by Gorgias Press (2009). The letter of Patriarch John addressed to Marutha of Tagrit is preserved solely in the Syriac manuscript. Neither this letter nor Marutha’s reply to it is attested in the Armenian versions. The letter states:

“Previously, the See of the Catholicoses of the Persians, Armenians, Gurzan and Aran, were subjects to the See of Antioch until the murder of the Catholicos Babai.”

Michael the Syrian identifies Dionysius of Tel Mahre as one of the sources for his Chronicle. According to Michael, Dionysius’s Chronicle encompassed the period from the

accession of Emperor Maurice (582–602) to the death of Emperor Theophilus (829–842), thus covering the years 582–842. Dionysius of Tel Mahre was the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch and head of the Syriac Orthodox Church from 818 to 845. At the request of John, Metropolitan of Dara, he composed his Chronicle around 838–842, narrating events from 582 to 842. Unfortunately, apart from a few surviving fragments, the work of Dionysius has not come down to us. Moreover, the extant fragments contain no reference to the letter of Patriarch John.

Although Dionysius of Tel Mahre was indeed one of Michael the Syrian's sources, the latter does not transmit Dionysius's account verbatim. Rather, he abbreviates, expands, or alters it. Consequently, it is impossible to state with certainty that the correspondence between John of Antioch and Marutha of Tagrit, as preserved in Michael's Chronicle, has come down to us in its original form. One must also bear in mind that the Syriac manuscript tradition alone preserves this correspondence, and that none of the Armenian translations contain it. This situation raises the critical question of whether John of Antioch and Marutha of Tagrit actually authored the exchange, or whether Michael himself reworked or even composed it. If we admit the latter possibility, we must further consider that Michael may have aimed to justify the renewed subordination of the churches named in the letter to the patriarchal authority of Antioch.

In the letter, John mentions four churches that had formerly been subject to the see of Antioch: the churches of Persia, Armenia, Gurzan (Iberia), and Aran (Caucasian Albania). During the period of Michael the Syrian's activity, the Miaphysite Church of Persia was headed by the Grand Metropolitan of the East, and it was indeed subordinate to the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch. The Miaphysite Church of Armenia existed independently and maintained close relations with the Syriac Jacobite Church. The Iberian Church, however, firmly upheld the dogma of the Council of Chalcedon, making any notion of its subordination to the Miaphysite Church of Antioch entirely inconceivable. The Church of Caucasian Albania, as an independent entity, no longer existed; it had merged with the Armenian Church. Accordingly, the mention of three of these four churches, Persia, Iberia, and Albania, would have been entirely meaningless if introduced by Michael the Syrian himself. For this reason, it is reasonable to conclude that Michael did not fabricate the letter but must have derived it from some earlier correspondence.

In addition to Dionysius of Tel Mahre, Michael the Syrian also drew upon Jacob of Edessa (c. 640 – 5 June 708) and John of Litharb (died c. 737/738) as sources. Time has largely destroyed the original text of Jacob of Edessa's Chronicle; only a small portion, some twenty-three folios, has survived, and it contains no trace of the correspondence of interest to us. John of Litharb's work itself has not come down to us, and it is known only through citations in the writings of Dionysius of Tel Mahre and Michael the Syrian.

As we can observe, since the sources employed by Michael the Syrian have not come down to us, it is impossible to determine with certainty which author preserved the correspondence between John of Antioch and Marutha of Tagrit. For this reason, we must turn directly to these letters themselves and examine the extent to which they provide reliable information.

In Georgian historiography, the reliability of the information contained in John of Antioch's letter has been assessed differently by various scholars. Mikheil Tarkhnishvili (1897-1958), one of the leading researchers of the history of the Georgian Church,

considered the letter "considerably reliable" when compared to other later Antiochene sources. Yet, he viewed its statements with caution, as no other source confirms the status of the Iberian Church described therein.

Giorgi Mamulia went further, describing the information concerning the Iberian Church as an "obvious falsification."

On the other hand, Academician David Muskhelishvili expressed unconditional confidence in John of Antioch's letter, using its data to date King Vakhtang Gorgasali's ecclesiastical reforms and the Iberian Church's emancipation from the authority of Antioch to the year 485.

The letter states that the churches of Persia, Armenia, Iberia, and Caucasian Albania were subject to the see of Antioch until the year 484. Apart from the Iberian Church, which is the direct object of our study, scholars have thoroughly investigated the histories of the other three churches. It is therefore of particular interest to assess how accurately the letter conveys information about them.

Scholars previously believed that the Church of Persia was indeed subject to the see of Antioch until 424. However, numerous studies conducted over the past decades have confirmed that the Church of Persia, known as the Church of the East, was independent from its foundation.

All authoritative sources and studies concerning the Church of Armenia indicate that from its foundation (ca. 314) it was not subject to the see of Antioch, but rather to the see of Caesarea in Cappadocia, from which it gained independence in the 370s.

The Church of Caucasian Albania maintained close ties with the Armenian Church, which had a significant influence on it. According to the extant Armenian sources, the Church of Albania had been subject to the Catholicos of Armenia since its foundation. No reliable source indicates that the Church of Albania was ever subordinate to the see of Antioch.

Thus, regarding three of the four churches mentioned in the letter, we can state with certainty that their subordination to the see of Antioch is false, and that the letter must have been composed with a specific purpose in mind. To determine this purpose, we need to examine the circumstances in which the letter was written.

The content of the letter indicates that John's visit to Sasanian Persia and his efforts to restore ecclesiastical unity preceded the correspondence between John of Antioch and Marutha of Tagrit. In 484–486, the Church of the East in Sasanian Persia officially adopted the extreme Dyophysite Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia. On this basis, the Miaphysite communities within the Church of the East declared themselves separate from the official Church. Lacking a firm ecclesiastical organization, they remained in this state until 559. In that year, the Miaphysite bishop of Edessa, Jacob Baradaeus, consecrated Ahudemme as Grand Metropolitan of the East, thus establishing an independent Miaphysite ecclesiastical organization in Sasanian Persia.

The rapprochement between the Jacobite Patriarchate of Antioch and the Miaphysite Church in Sasanian Persia began in 628, following Emperor Heraclius's defeat of Sasanian Persia. The Patriarch of Antioch seized the opportunity presented by the extreme weakening of Sasanian Persia and established contact with the leaderless Miaphysite Church of the East. In 628 or 629, Patriarch Athanasius of Antioch (594/595 or 603 – 631) sent his representative, John (later Patriarch John II of Antioch), to Sasanian

Persia, where he met the Sasanian King of Kings Ardashir III (628 – 630). At the Mar Mattai Monastery, the council restored ecclesiastical unity between the Miaphysites of Persia and the Jacobite Patriarchate of Antioch. John returned to Antioch, accompanied by Marutha and other representatives of the Persian Miaphysites. Athanasius of Antioch consecrated Marutha as Grand Metropolitan of the East.

Naturally, a single act of consecration by the Patriarch of Antioch could not make the Grand Metropolitan subject to the see of Antioch; the Antiochene Church needed to engage further. John II, Athanasius of Antioch's successor, continued the work initiated by his predecessor. Upon his accession to the patriarchal throne, he sent a letter to Marutha of Tagrit, advancing the idea that the Church of Persia had formerly been subordinate to the see of Antioch, to bring the Miaphysite Church of Persia and the churches of the South Caucasus under Antiochene authority. As Marutha's response shows, the Miaphysites of Persia accepted this idea under pressure.

It seems evident that the idea presented in the letter of John of Antioch regarding the subordination of the Iberian Church to the see of Antioch is a blatant falsification.