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THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINE OF THE IBERIAN CHURCH FROM THE FOURTH TO THE SEVENTH CENTURIES

This article provides a general overview of the key issues surrounding the dogmatic stance of the Georgian Church in Late Antiquity and identifies research questions for future study. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholarship on the history of the Georgian Church became particularly active, and the Late Antique period of the Georgian Church, in particular, merits close scholarly attention. During this time, the dogmatic position of the Georgian Church was especially unstable, and the religious landscape was remarkably diverse. These conditions gave the period a special importance for the subsequent development of Georgian Christianity.

According to the medieval Georgian tradition, the Orthodoxy of the Georgian Church always was incorruptible and pure. The Georgian Church never betrayed the creed of Nicaea-Constantinople and never deviated from the 'righteous' path of the Orthodox faith. The famous eleventh-century Georgian monk and ecclesiastical writer George of Athos proudly claimed that the Georgian Orthodoxy was untouched by the various heresies that shook the foundations of the Byzantine Orthodoxy (Abuladze 1967: 101-207). The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Georgian intellectuals shared this firmly established view, and this long tradition of the Georgian historiography was inherited by the nineteenth century historiography as well (Bagrationi 1848: 130-141), although from the end of the nineteenth century the critical investigation of the early Georgian Christianity had begun. This investigation showed interesting picture, quite a different from the conventional narrative of the Georgian Church (see Javakhishvili 1900).

Scholars such as Tamila Mgaloblishvili and Iulon Gagoshidze have proposed the notion of the Semitic origins of Georgian Christianity (Mgaloblishvili... 1998: 40-47). According to this theory, the spread of Christianity in Iberia began among the local Jewish community. The burials reveal interesting details about the initial phase of Christianity in the Iberian Kingdom. The presence of Jewish communities in Iberia is attested as early as the second century A.D.

The potentially important role of Jews in the Christianization of Georgia is reflected in the medieval tradition, especially in *The Life of St. Nino*.

This tradition assigns a special role to Georgian Jews in the conversion of the Iberian Kingdom. According to it, the life of St. Nino was originally recorded in Aramaic within the Jewish community of Mc'xet'a and was later translated into Georgian. Of course, this claim still lacks direct evidence. However, I have proposed that the origins of *The Life of St. Nino*, usually dated to the ninth or tenth century, may go back to the fifth or sixth centuries (Matitashvili 2021: 253-277). It is quite possible that oral legends concerning the activities of Georgia's female apostle survived among the Jews of Mc'xet'a. These oral traditions may later have been combined and shaped into the first written edition of the vita. Archaeological excavations confirm that the Jewish community of Mc'xet'a remained very active during the fifth century.

Christian missionaries preaching across the Middle East and the Caucasus visited local Jewish communities before anyone else. The prominent role of Jews in the conversion of Iberia strongly suggests that Christianity spread in eastern Georgia from these local Jewish groups—particularly the community of Mc'xet'a. However, one still unanswered question arises here: did this local Jewish community profess a Christianity distinct from Orthodoxy? If so, to what extent can we see their connection with other Christian-Jewish communities and Gnostic movements of the Christian East? At this stage of the research, it is impossible to answer these questions, although, hopefully, future research will shed light on this earlier stage of Georgian Christianity.

Through the critical investigation of the sources one can find out that the Late Antique Iberia was characterized by a religious diversity. The conversion to Christianity did not completely eliminate the diverse religious environment that had existed in Iberia for centuries. Religious conversion did not happen instantly. The process of the Christianization of Iberia continued for centuries (Rapp 2012: 93-94). The newly founded Christian Church of Iberia existed alongside the still strong Georgian paganism, local Georgian mazdaism, Persian Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Manichaeism and other smaller and less influential religious groups (Mgaloblishvili... 2011: 376-378). However, during the late antiquity we encounter quite unexpected doctrinal diversity in the Iberian Church itself. It is well-known that that late antiquity was a crucial period for the formation of the Christian doctrine and the theological and philosophical terminology associated with this doctrine(s).

Obviously, this doctrinal diversity and endless theological disputes taking place in the Late Roman empire had a strong influence on the Caucasian Churches. There is an extremely rich scholarly literature on the theological positions of the late antique Iberian Church and interrelation between the Caucasian (Armenian and Albanian) Churches during the fourth and seventh centuries (see Tsiklauri 2017), however, many things remain

to be clarified. One has a hard time when he or she takes an attempt to floodlight the dogmatic position of the Iberian Church during this period. A significant obstacle here is the scarcity of the surviving sources and the numerous anachronisms that these sources contain. Nevertheless, taking into account the religio-political context of the Caucasus and the Middle East at that time and the critical analysis of the given sources, it is possible to reconstruct the general picture with more or less clarity.

Today, few scholars doubt that the kingdom of Iberia was converted to Christianity during the reign of Constantine the Great (306-337) (Rapp 2012: 371). Towards the end of his reign the emperor Constantine showed great sympathy for Arianism. Under the influence of Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea, the emperor increasingly doubted the decision made at the Council of Nicaea (325). At the end of his life (337), the emperor received baptism from the famous Arian - Eusebius of Nicomedia. His son Constantius II (337-361) was already apparently favored Arianism. Taking into account the religious environment of the Roman Empire of this era, one of the first questions my research aims to answer is the following: how much did the Arian doctrine influence the Church of Iberia in the middle and second half of the fourth century? We know that after the treaty of Nizibis (299) the Iberian kingdom fell under the Roman protectorate. How much the religious politics of the Roman empire influenced the Iberian kingdom and what the scarce surviving sources tell us about this? (see Kekelidze 1928).

It is difficult to follow how the situation changed in the Iberian Church in the second half of the fourth century. In all probability, after the Second ecumenical Council in 381 and the final victory of the Nicene Creed, the Georgian Church followed the path laid down by the imperial Church (even though Iberia had fallen out from the sphere of the Roman dominance). At the beginning of the fifth century, the religious situation changed again. The influence of the Persian Church (Syro-Persian Church or, the Church of the East) on Iberia is became stronger. Apparently, this influence was backed by the Persian royal court. For some time, the Church of Iberia came under the influence of the Church of the East (Chikovani 2020: 147-166; Mamulia 1992: 6-7). Does this mean that in Iberia the so-called the spread of the 'Nestorian' heresy? Due to the scarcity of sources, it is difficult to say with certainty, however, it is a fact that the doctrine, which became known as 'Nestorianism' had some supporters in Iberia. Iberian Bishop Jeremiah went to Ephesus to attend the third ecumenical council (431) and it also known that he actively fought against "Nestorianism" in Constantinople (that is, the doctrine wrongly attributed to Nestorius) in Constantinople. This means that Iberian Church was quite aware of the problem of 'Nestorian' doctrine and at least, some members of the Georgian clergy decided to resist its influence.

By the middle of the fifth century, another doctrine appeared in the Eastern Roman Empire - Miaphysitism, which opposed the separation of divine and human nature in Christ. In 451, the fourth ecumenical council of Chalcedon condemned the Miaphysite teaching. It is not clear how did the Iberian Church reacted to the decisions of the council in the middle of the fifth century, although it is a well-known that in 491, during the reign of the famous Iberian king Vakhtang Gorgasali (442-502), at the council of Vagharshapat, the Iberian Church, together with other Caucasian Churches, accepted and the doctrine of 'Henoticon,' which obviously meant the acceptance of Miaphysite doctrine (despite the fact that it is known as conciliatory document) (Garsoian 2010: 504-505).

The religious situation becomes even more complicated during the sixth century. Evidently, before the rule of Justin (518-527) and Justinian (527-565), the Iberian Church remained on the Miaphysite belief, but how did the situation change after the ascendance on the throne of the emperor Justin and then his nephew Justinian? During his long reign the emperor Justinian tried to reconcile Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians. This politics certainly influenced the Iberian Church where the Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians coexisted peacefully during several decades. There is no evidence that the Iberian Church had strong opinion or, radical position concerning the council of Chalcedon. However, the situation changed from the 570s. The growing influence of the Chalcedonian party in the Iberian Church ultimately led to the Armeno-Georgian ecclesiastical schism in 609.

In the beginning of the seventh century, in 609, the final split between the Georgian and Armenian Churches happened. Iberia firmly followed the Chalcedonian path (Aleksidze 2018: 4-5). In the first half of the seventh century, the most important political and religious changes took place in the Caucasus and the Middle East. The Byzantine and Sasanian empires almost destroyed each other. The three-century war between the Byzantium and the Sasanian Persia ended with the victory of the Byzantium (Rapp 2012: 378). The emperor Heraclius defeated the Persian king Chosroes II (in 627 AD). Heraclius became an active defender of the new religious doctrine, Monothelitism, although we do not know what influence this doctrine had on the Iberian Church. Heraclius' victory and the peace in the Byzantine empire did not last long. Soon the Arabs appeared as new conquerors, who also soon established their power in Iberia. What was the impact of the Arab dominance on the Georgian Church? From the scarce sources, it is clear that some bishops of the seventh-century Iberian Church were Syrians. Did this mean that again the 'Nestorian' doctrine became somehow dominant in Iberia? Probably, for the certain parts of the seventh century this is quite possible, although from the eighth century this influence had been vanished (Matitashvili).

To sum up, my research aims to reconstruct the transformation of the doctrinal position of the Iberian Church throughout the late antiquity. This reconstruction also implies to clarify the relation of the Iberian Church with other local Churches and the place of Iberia in the greater political and religious context of the late antique Caucasus, Byzantium and Middle East.

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