

# THE NESTORIAN CHURCH

## The Ancient Christians Church of Mesopotamia

### *The Early Nestorians*

*Among* those who had been present at the Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in support of Nestorius was Ibas, presbyter (priest) and head of the theological school of Edessa. In 435 he became bishop of Edessa and under his influence the Nestorian teaching made considerable progress. On the accusation of the so called orthodox he was deposed by the "Robber Synod" of Ephesus, but at Chalcedon in 451 was pardoned on condition of anathematizing both Nestorius and Eutyches and accepting the Tome of Leo, the bishop of Rome. He had not, however, changed his views, and this was generally recognized.

Meanwhile one of his pupils, Barsumas, had settled at Nisibis in Persian territory where he became bishop in 435 and established a Nestorian theological school. And when the Roman emperor in Constantinople suppressed the school of Edessa ("the Athens of Syria") in AD 489, and expelled its members, they traveled widely throughout Asia as eager and successful missionaries of the Gospel of Christ.

In Persia their numbers and their zeal stimulated the old churches into vigor and led to the founding of new ones. And as they were under ban from Rome and out of communion with the Byzantine Church the Persian government welcomed them as a political ally, though the religious opposition of the Magi was still largely retained.

In their new environment the Nestorians abandoned some of the rigorous forms of Christian asceticism, and at a synod held in 499 abolished clerical celibacy even for bishops and went so far as to permit repeated marriages, in striking contrast not only to orthodox custom but to the practice of Aphraats at Edessa who had even advocated celibacy as a condition of baptism. The liberty here granted to bishops was enjoyed as late as the 12th century, but since then the Nestorian Church has assimilated its custom to that of the Greek Church. That the ascetic ideal was by no means wholly

extinct is evident from the *Book of Governors* written by Thomas, bishop of Marga, in 840 which bears witness to a Syrian monasticism founded by one Awgin of Egyptian descent, who settled in Nisibis about AD 350, and lasting uninterrupted until the time of Thomas, though it had long been absorbed in the great Nestorian movement that had annexed the church in Mesopotamia.

The Nestorian Church in Eastern Syria and Persia was under the jurisdiction of an archbishop (*catholikos*), who in 498 assumed the title "Patriarch of the East" and had his seat at Seleucia/Ctesiphon on the Tigris River, a busy trading city and a fitting center for the great area over which the evangelizing activity of the Nestorians now extended. The church traced its doctrines to Theodore of Mopsuestia rather than to Nestorius, whose name at first they repudiated, not regarding themselves as having been proselytized to any new teaching.

### **The Later Nestorians**

In AD 608 Magian influence was so strong in Persia that the Christians were persecuted and the office of *catholikos* was vacant for 20 years, being filled again by Jesu-Jabus, during whose patriarchate the Arab Moslem invasion overran Persia. The patriarch was able to secure from the Moslem caliph permission for the Christians to practice their religion in return for tribute money and this was afterwards remitted.

The Moslem ruler, Ibn Ali Talib, anxious to perpetuate their severance from the Greek Orthodox Church and the Byzantine Empire, confirmed these privileges by charter and in 762 the patriarchate was removed to Bagdad. For five centuries the Nestorians were a recognized institution within the territory conquered by Islam, though their treatment varied from kindly to harsh. Biruni, a Moslem writer, who lived at Khiva *circa* A.D. 1000, speaks of the Nestorian Christians as comprising the majority of the population of Syria, Iraq and Khorasan, and as superior to the Greek Orthodox Christians in intellectual ability.

They agreed with Byzantines in observing Lent, Christmas and Epiphany, but differed from them in the observance of all other feasts and fasts. The

Latin Church tried in vain during the Crusades to secure their submission to Rome. The barbaric invasions of the 13th and 14th centuries fell with crushing force on the Nestorians. In 1258 the Mongol Hulagu Khan took Bagdad, and about AD 1400 Timur again seized and sacked the city. Though the Nestorians were numerous, their moral influence and their church life had greatly deteriorated. Those who escaped capture by Timur fled to the mountains of Kurdistan, and the community that had played so large a part in Mesopotamian history for a thousand years was thus shattered.

In 1552 they were further weakened by a large ecclesial split known as "the Chaldean Church" arising out of a dispute about the succession to the patriarchate. The discontented appealed to Rome, and the pope (Julius III.) consecrated the Chaldean catholicos. The Chaldeans are now chiefly found in rural districts east of the Tigris River. They have a see at Bagdad and a monastery, Rabban Hormuz,) and are called by those Syrian Christians who have resisted the papal overtures, *Maghlabin* ("the conquered").

Other attempts during the 16th century to promote union between the Nestorians and Rome proved fruitless, but the Roman Catholic Church has never ceased in its efforts to absorb this ancient community. The Jacobite or Syrian Monophysite Church who, like the Nestorians, diverged from the Byzantine Church, but did so in an exactly opposite direction. Like the Nestorians they were great missionaries, and up to the 7th century, and again in the 12th and 13th, produced the bulk of Syriac literature. The chief Nestorian authors were in the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries: Babbai the elder and Isho-yabh of Gedhala, commentators; Sandona, who wrote on the monastic life; Abraham the Lame, a devotional and penitential writer; Dionysius of Tell Mahre, whose *Annals* are important; and Thomas of Marga. In the 14th century there were Abdh-isho bar Berikha (d. 1318) the author of a theological treatise *Marganitha* ("the Pearl"), 1298, and the *Paradise of Eden*, a collection of 50 theological poems.

### ***The Nestorian Missionary Enterprise***

*The combined hostility of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Byzantine Empire drove the Nestorians into exile, but they went much further than was needed simply to secure immunity from persecution. They demonstrated*

a zeal for evangelization which resulted in the establishment of their influence throughout Asia, as is seen from the bishoprics (dioceses) founded not only in Syria, Armenia, Arabia and Persia, but at Halavan in Media, Mery in Khorasan, Herat, Tashkent, Samarkand, Baluk, Kashgar, and even at Kambaluk (Beijing) and Singan fu Hsi` en fu in China, and Kaljana and Kranganore in India.

In 1265 they numbered 25 Asiatic provinces and over 70 dioceses. Mongolian invasions and Moslem tyranny have, of course, long since swept away all traces of many of these. The 400,000 Syrian Christians ("Christians of Saint Thomas the Apostle") who live in Malabar no doubt owe their origin to Nestorian missionaries, the stories of the evangelization of India by the Apostles Thomas and Bartholomew having no real historical foundation, and the Indian activity of Pantaenus of Alexandria having proved fruitless, in whatever part of India it may have been exercised.

The theology of the Indian Syrian Christians is of a Nestorian type, and Cosmas Indicopleustes (6th century) puts us on the right track when he says that the Christians whom he found in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Malabar had come from Persia (probably as refugees from persecution, similar to the later French Huguenots who fled to England and the Pilgrim Fathers who fled to America).

Pahlavi inscriptions' found on crosses at St Thomas's Mount near Madras and at Kottayam in Travancore, are evidence both of the antiquity of Christianity in these places (7th or 8th century), and for the semi-patristicarianism (the apparent identification of all three persons of the Trinity in the sufferer on the cross) which marked the Nestorian teaching.

In 745 Thomas of Kana brought a new teaching, "In punishment by the cross (was) the suffering of this One; He who is the true Christ, and God alone, and Guide ever pure," with a band of emigrants from Bagdad and Nineveh, and possibly the name "Christians of Saint Thomas" arose from confusion between this man and the first century apostle of Jesus. Other reinforcements came from Persia in 822, but the Malabar church never developed any intellectual vigor or missionary zeal. They had their own kings, lived as a closed caste, and even imitated the Hindus in caste regulations of food and avoidance of pollution.

In 1330 Pope John XXII. issued a bull appointing Jordanus, a French Dominican, bishop of Quilon, and inviting the Nestorians to enter the Roman Catholic Church. The invitation was declined, but in the 16th century the Syrian Christians sought the help of the Portuguese settlers against Mussulman oppression, only to find that before long they were subjected to the fiercer perils of Jesuit antagonism and the Inquisition. The Syrians submitted to Rome at the synod of Dampier in 1599, but it was a forced submission, and in 1653 when the Portuguese arrested the Syrian bishop just sent out by the Catholikos of Babylon, the rebellion broke out. The renunciation was not quite thorough, one party adhering to the Roman Church as Romo-Syrians, the others reverting wholly to Syrian usages and forming today about three-fourths of the whole community.

In 1665 a curious thing happened. Gregory, the Jacobite metropolitan of Jerusalem, visited Malabar, and, as the people had no consecrated bishop at the time, he consecrated Mar Thomas, who had been filling the office at the people's request, and remained in the country jointly administering the affairs of the Church with Thomas. Thus the Nestorian Church in India, voluntarily and with perfect indifference to theological dogmas, passed under Jacobite rule, and when early in the 18th century, Mar (Siant) Gabriel, a Nestorian bishop, came to Malabar, he had a cool reception, and could only detach a small following of Syrians whom he brought back to the old Nestorianism. The approaches of the Anglican Church through the Church Missionary Society in the first part of the 19th century were politely repelled. On the death of the bishop Mar (Saint) Athanasius Matthew in 1877, litigation began as to his successor; it lasted ten years, and the decision (since reversed) was given against the party that held by the Nestorian connection and the habitual autonomy of the Malabar church in favor of the supremacy of the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch. The great need of the Indian Syrian church at that time was an educated ministry.

Early evidence of Nestorian missions in China is extant in the tablet discovered in 1625 at Chang`an in the district of Hsi`en-fu, province of Shensi. It commemorates "the introduction and propagation of the noble law of Ta t`sin in the Middle Kingdom," and beneath an incised cross sets out in Chinese and Syriac an abstract of Christian doctrine and the course of a Syrian mission in China beginning with the favorable reception of the Nestorian Christian missionary, Olopan, who came from Judaea in AD 636.

For two generations the little cause prospered, and again after persecutions in 699 and 813.

Later on a second mission arrived, many churches were built and several Chinese emperors patronized the faith. This evidence is confirmed by (a) the canon of Theodore of Edessa (AD 800) allowing metropolitans of China, India and other distant lands to send their reports to the Catholikos every six years; (b) the edict of Wu Tsung destroying Buddhist monasteries and ordering 300 foreign priests to return to the secular life that the customs of the empire might be uniform; (c) two 9th-century Arab travelers, one of whom, Ibn Wahhab, discussed the contents of the Bible with the emperor; (d) and the discovery in 1725 of a Syrian manuscript containing Christian liturgical hymns and a portion of the Old Testament.

In the 10th century the Nestorians introduced Christianity into the territory of the Tartars; in 1274 Marco Polo saw two of their churches. The legend of Prester John is based on the idea of the conversion of a Mongol tribe, the Karith, whose chieftain Ung Khan at baptism received the title Malek Juchana (King John). And there came to light a manuscript of the 9th or 10th century in Sogdianese, an Indo-Iranian language spoken in the north-east of Asia, which shows that the Nestorians had translated the New Testament into that language and had taught the natives the alphabet and Christian doctrine. Their activity may well be said to have covered the continent.

Their campaign was one of deliberate expansion, one of the greatest ever planned by Christian missionaries. Marco Polo is witness that there were Nestorian churches all along the trade routes from Bagdad to Beijing. *The Nestorians or East Syrians (Surayi)* of Turkey and Persia as late as the early twentieth century inhabited a district bounded by Lake Urmia, or Urumia, on the east, stretching westwards into Kurdistan, to Mosul on the south, and nearly as far as Van on the north. They were divided into the Persian Nestorians of the plain of Azerbaijan, and the Turkish Nestorians, inhabiting chiefly the sanjak of Hakkiari in the vilayet of Van, who were subdivided into the *Rayat* or subject, and the *Ashiret* or tribal, the latter being semi-independent in their mountain fastnesses. Together they formed a church and a nation, they had allegiance to their hereditary patriarch, Mar Shimun, Catholikos of the East, who resided at Qudshanis, a village about 7000 feet above sea-level, near the Kurdish town of Julamerk. It is only of

late years, under the influence of the different missions, that education, ruined by centuries of persecution, had revived among the Nestorians; and, even at that time, the mountain dwellers, cut off from the outer world, were as a rule destitute of learning, and greatly resembled their neighbors, the wild and uncivilized Kurds.

They are, however, extraordinarily tenacious of their ancient customs, and, almost totally isolated from the rest of Christendom since the 5th century, they afford an interesting study to the student of church history. Their churches are rude buildings, dimly lighted and destitute of pictures or images, save that of the Cross, which is treated with the deepest veneration. The *qanki*, or sanctuary, is divided from the nave, by a solid wall, pierced by a single doorway; it contains the altar, or *madhb'kha* (literally, *the sacrificing place*), and may be entered only by persons in holy orders who are fasting. Here is celebrated the Eucharist (*Qurbana*, or the *offering*; "corban"), by the priest (*qasha*), attended by his deacon (*shamasha*). Vestments are worn only at the ministration of the sacraments; incense is used invariably at the Eucharist and frequently at other services. There are three liturgies - of the Holy Apostles, of Theodore and of Nestorius. The first is quite free from Nestorian influence, dates from some remote period, perhaps prior to AD 431, and is certainly the most ancient of those now in use in Christendom; the other two, though early, are undoubtedly of later date. The Nestorian canon of Scripture seems never to have been fully determined, nor is the sacramental system rigidly defined. Nestorian writers, however, generally reckon the mysteries as seven, *i.e.* Priesthood, Oil of Unction, the Offering of the Body and Blood of Christ, Absolution, The Holy Leaven, the Signation of the life-giving Cross. The "Holy Leaven" is reputed to be a part of the original bread of the first Eucharist, brought by Addai and Mari' and maintained ever since in the Church; it is used in the confection of the Eucharistic wafers, which are rather thicker than those typically used in the Western Church. Communion is given in both kinds, as throughout the East; likewise, confirmation is administered directly after baptism. Sacramental confession is enjoined, but has recently become obsolete; prayers for the departed and invocation of saints form part of the liturgies. The bishops are always celibates and are chosen from episcopal families. The service-books were wholly in manuscript form until in the late nineteenth century, the press of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Anglican

mission at Urmia issued the *Takhsa* containing the eucharistic liturgies, baptismal office, and several other liturgical texts.

The Nestorians commemorate Nestorius as a saint, and invoke his aid and that of his companions. They reject the Third Ecumenical Council, and though showing the greatest devotion to the Blessed Virgin, deny her the title of *Theotokos*, i.e. the mother or bearer of God. Their theological teaching is misty and perplexing; They regard their earliest writings as containing no error, and the hymns of their great St Ephrem, still sung in their liturgies, are positively antagonistic to "Nestorianism"; their theology dating from the schism is not so satisfactory. They attribute two *Kiani*, two *Qnumi* and one *Parsopa* as the legendary founders of the Syrian Church. Addai was supposed to be one of the Seventy of Luke 10: 1, and Mari his disciple.

To say that the modern Nestorians are not definitely and firmly orthodox is perhaps fairer than to charge them with being distinctly heretical.

### **Missions amongst the Nestorians**

The peculiar circumstances, both ecclesiastical and temporal, of the Nestorians have attracted much attention in western Christendom, and various missionary enterprises amongst them have resulted.

*The Roman Catholic Missions:* In Turkey these consisted of the Dominican mission, established at Mosul during the 18th century, and in Persia of the French Lazarist mission, which sprang out of some schools established by a French layman and scientific traveler, Eugene Bore, in 1838. At Bore's entreaty the Propaganda sent the first Lazarist father to Persia in 1840. The chief stations of the Lazarists are at Khosrova and Urmia. At the latter place there is an orphanage under the superintendence of the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul. The work of these missions was to extend and consolidate that Romanized and partly Latinized offshoot of the Nestorians known as the *Uniat-Chaldean Church*.

*The American Presbyterian Mission:* established in Persia in 1834-1835 by the Rev. Justin Perkins and Dr A. Grant, comprised large buildings near Urmia, a college and a hospital. The influence of this mission does not extend much beyond the Turkish frontier, but it is strong in the Persian plains. The



original aim was to influence the old Nestorian Church rather than to set up a new religious body, but the wide difference between Presbyterians and an Oriental Church rendered the attempt abortive, and the result of the labors of the Americans has been the establishment since 1862 of a Syrian Protestant community in Persia, with some adherents in Turkey.

### **The Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission to the Assyrian Christians**

This Anglican mission was promoted by Archbishop Tait, and finally established by Archbishop Benson in 1886. Its aim is thus officially defined: "To aid an existing Church, ... not to Anglicanize, ... not to change any doctrines held by them which are not contrary to that faith which the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church of Christ, has taught us as necessary to be believed by all Christians, but to strengthen an ancient Church, at the earnest request of the Catholikos, and with the knowledge and blessing of the Patriarch of Antioch, one of the four patriarchs of the Holy Orthodox Eastern Church, and occupant of the Apostolic See from which the Church of the East revolted at the time of Nestorius." This mission had its headquarters at Urmia, with a college for candidates for holy orders.

### **The Russian Mission**

One of the Nestorian bishops joined the Russian Orthodox Church in 1898, and returned that same year with a small band of missionaries sent by the Holy Synod of Russia. This mission enrolled a very large number of adherents drawn from the old Church, the Protestant Nestorians, and the Uniat-Chaldeans, but it can hardly be said to have commenced any active work, although the Anglican mission withdrew from competition by closing its schools in the dioceses occupied by the Russians at that time.