

The Assyrian Church of the East: A Panoramic View of a Glorious History

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Apostolic Origins and Beginnings

The beginnings of the Assyrian Church are to be found in the very first decades of the apostolic era. With the revelation of the Son of God in the flesh, the salvific message of the Gospel was open to all peoples of divers tongues and cultures. The Gospel-writer St. Luke records in the book of *Acts* the events of the growth and spread of the Christian Gospel in the Holy City and abroad, to the outer limits of the Roman Empire.

We read in the Acts 2 the wondrous happenings surrounding the Pentecost feast celebrated at Jerusalem by our Lord's disciples. The promise of the Holy Spirit given to disciples before Jesus was taken up to the Father gave hope to the fledgling Christian community at Jerusalem (cf. John 16:13; Acts 1:4). This promise was fulfilled on the day of the Jewish feast of the Pentecost, which took place at Jerusalem 50 days after the Lord's Resurrection. Luke records:

And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marveled, saying one to another. Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea and Cappodocia in Pontus, and Asia... (Acts 2:5-9)

Among those who had gone up to Jerusalem in order to be present in the Holy City for the Pentecost feast, there were Jews from Mesopotamia. Those who received the Gospel on the day of Pentecost early on spread it among the Assyrians who were dwelling in Mesopotamia: "...then they that gladly received his word were

baptized; and the same day they were added unto them about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41).

Another ancient tradition recorded in the Gospel of Matthew tells of the wise men who had come from the East—certain Magi who had followed the star which led them to the Holy Child in Bethlehem. The evangelist Matthew tells us: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying: ‘Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him,” Matthew 2:1-2. According to the tradition of the Fathers of the Church, such as St. John Chrysostom (died 407) these wise-men were Persians who had come from the East searching for the Child born under the star, thus following the ancient tradition of their prophet Zoroaster.

The Spread of the Gospel to Mesopotamia

Missionaries from the Holy City of Jerusalem came to preach the Gospel among the Jews in the Diaspora present in Mesopotamia and the Persian Empire. The Acts of the Apostles only records the first Christian missions *within* the limits of the Roman Empire. Therefore, it is the holy tradition of the Assyrian Church, coupled with historical evidences, that records the spread of the Gospel *outside* of the limits of the Roman Empire, namely within the Persian Empire—the second superpower of its day.



Edessene Coin of Abgar IX

Since of the fall of the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C., the inhabitants spread far and wide across Mesopotamia. The fact that the remnants of the ancient Assyrians spoke the Aramaic language in the day of Christ—which was the very

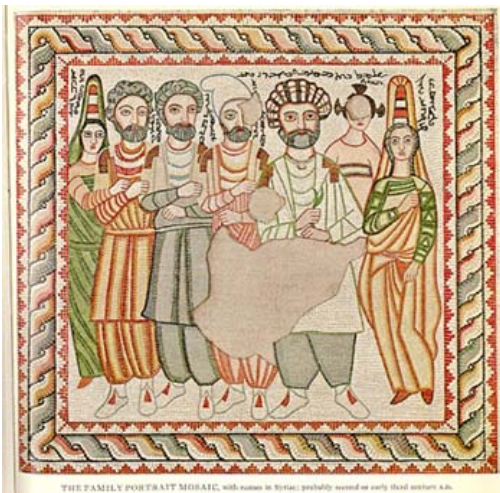
language of Christ himself and the *lingua franca* of the East—the Gospel found fertile ground. So it was that in the first decades of the Christian era the Apostle Mar Addai (St. Addai), who is

equated sometimes with the ‘Thaddeus’ of the Twelve, was sent by St. Thomas the Apostle to the city of Edessa (Osroene), which was dependent upon the Roman Caesar and acted as a buffer-zone between Rome and Persia.

The missionary work of Addai came about through a promise given by our Lord to its vassal king Abgar the Black. According to the annals of Church history recorded by the great historian Eusebius the bishop of Caesarea, Abgar had sent emissaries to Jerusalem asking that Jesus—the good healer whom he had heard about—would come and cure him from his illness. Abgar’s *Letter to Jesus* reads:

Abgar Ukkama [the Black], the Toparch, to Jesus the good Savior who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem, greeting. I have heard concerning you and your cures, how they are accomplished by you without drugs and herbs. For, as the story goes, you make the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, and you cleanse lepers, and cast out unclean spirits and demons, and you cure those who are tortured by long disease and you raise dead men. And when I heard all these things concerning you and I decided that it is one of the two, either that you are God, and came down from heaven to do these things, or are the Son of God for doing these things. For this reason I write to beg you to listen to me and to heal the suffering which I have...

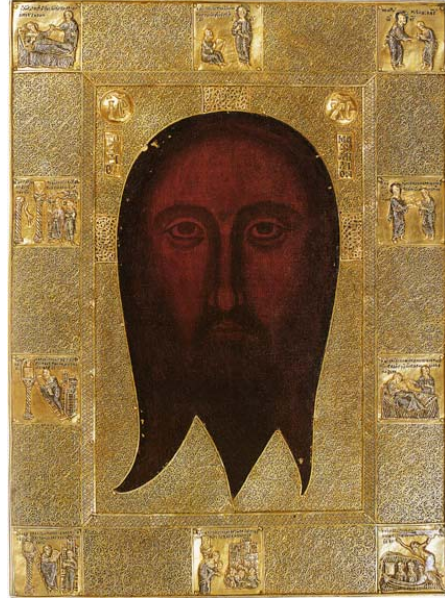
Our Lord replies to the king through the emissary whom Abgar had sent to Jerusalem to meet with Jesus by the name of Hannan (Annas):



1st Century Christian Mosaic at Edessa

Blessed are you who did believe in me not having seen me, for it is written concerning me that those who have seen me will not believe in me, and that those who have not seen me will believe and live. Now concerning what you wrote to me, to come to you, I must first complete here all which I was sent, and after thus completing it be taken up to him who sent me, and when I have been taken up, I will send to you one of my disciples to heal your suffering and give life to you and those with you.

The emissaries also brought back with them an image of Christ, which was drawn by Hannan and blessed by Jesus. The image has come to be called the 'Holy Image of Edessa.' It is mentioned in the *Doctrine of Addai* and by the late-fourth century pilgrim to Edessa, the Iberian nun Igeria. We read in the *Doctrine*: “When Hannan, the keeper of the archives, saw that Jesus spoke thus to him, by virtue of being the king's painter, he took and painted a likeness of Jesus with choice paints, and brought with him to Abgar the king, his master. And when Abgar the king saw the likeness, he received it with great joy, and placed it with great honor in one of his palatial houses” (*Doctrine of Addai* 13). It is believed that the Holy Image was later taken to Constantinople by the Byzantine emperor Romanus I in 944/45, where it was kept and a copy made. The image is now kept in Genoa, Italy, from at least the 14th century when it was sent as a gift from the Byzantine emperor John V Palaeologus to the doge of Genoa.



Thus, the apostle Addai was sent to Edessa about 3 years after the Resurrection and preached the Gospel not only to the Jewish inhabitants of the city, but the divine Message was received by citizens who were descendents of the ancient Assyro-Babylonians. The emissary of King Abgar, Hannan, had brought back with him an image of the Lord known as the 'Image of Edessa' which was miraculously composed.

Another early tradition of the Church attributes the evangelization of the Assyrians to the missionary activity of the apostles in the region of Adiabene, modern-day Arbil in northern Iraq. This area, in essence the whole strip of land between the mighty Tigris and Euphrates rivers mentioned in Genesis, was called 'Assyria' by the famous Greek topographer Strabo of Amasia (64 BC-23 AD) in

his famous work of the year 20 A.D.—the *Geographica*. He mentions Assyria and the Parthian Persia east of Asia ‘whose eastern provinces touched the borders of India.’ Here was a thriving Jewish community that early on received the Gospel message from apostles sent to Edessa from Jerusalem. Almost a century following Strabo, the Roman emperor Trajan conquered Mesopotamia in 115, thus making it a Roman province, calling it ‘Assyria.’

The other major missionary activity took place by the end of the first Christian century centered around the royal twin-cities of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The city was founded by one of the generals of Alexander the Great, Seleucus I Nicator in the fourth century BC. Later, it became the winter residence of the Persian emperors sometime after 129 BC.

According to the document, the *Acts of Mari*, St. Thaddeus (Addai) had sent his disciple Mari from Edessa to preach to the inhabitants of the royal cities.



Remains of Persian Palace at Seleucia

By the end of the first Christian century, according to ecclesiastical tradition, St. Mari had founded over 300 convents and churches in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and he was buried in the church of Deir Qunni.

In essence the presence of Jews in the thriving cities of Edessa, Nisibis and Adiabene—connected by the Silk Road—provided fertile ground for the planting of the seed of the Christian Gospel. In these regions, not only were there communities of Jews dispersed throughout Mesopotamia since the Babylonian Exile (589-539 BC), but the descendents of the ancient Assyrians who inhabited Mesopotamia for millennia, having adopted the Aramaic language, were ardent to receive the preaching of the Jewish missionaries who came to proclaim the revelation of the Son of God.

Ecclesiastical Organization and Expansion

The Assyrian Church of the East began to grow at an enormous pace. By the year 325, the episcopacy of the Assyrian Church—variously known as the ‘Church of Persia’ since it was the only Christian Church within the *limes* of the Persian Empire—was organized around Papa, the bishop of the royal cities of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. In 410, the first synod of the Persian bishops took place under the presidency of the Catholicos Mar Isaac. It was at this council that the Creed and canons of the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) were received by the Assyrian Church. The Church was by now distributed in all parts



Reliquary of St. Thomas at Ortona

and major cities of Mesopotamia. It was still within the limits of the Persian Empire. It enjoyed close ecclesiastical ties with the see of Antioch, which was the nearest, major Christian see existing within the Roman Empire.

As early as the middle of the fourth century, contacts were made with the Christian community in Southern India who were evangelized by St. Thomas the Apostle. Thomas is said to have arrived in Southern India around the year 52 AD, and to have been martyred in 72 AD. He was buried at Mylapore, but his relics were transferred to Edessa sometime in the first half of the third century. His commemoration on July 3 recalls the transfer of his relics from Mylapore to Edessa. His relics are now in the cathedral at Ortona, Italy.

In 345 AD the bishop Thomas Knanay, along with some 70 families, migrated from Babylon to South India, thus settling there and strengthening the Christian community by effecting contact between the Church of the East and the Indian Christians. Later contacts with Byzantium at the turn of the seventh century further proved to expand this Church. After the Council of Ephesus (431), when the Nestorius the patriarch of Constantinople was condemned for his views

on the unity of the Godhead and the humanity in Christ, the Church of the East was branded as 'Nestorian' on account of its refusal to anathematize the patriarch.



Nestorian Monument of Sian-Fu

The missionary zeal of the Assyrian Church was kindled in the early part of the seventh century. In the year 635 AD, the first group of missionaries was sent from Persia to China. The Assyrian monks followed the famed Silk Road, which led them to the China of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD).

The centennial of the first Christian mission to China was commemorated in a stele erected in the year 781 during the patriarchate of Mar Khanisho. The famous Nestorian stele was discovered at Sian-Fu (near Peking) at the turn of the 20th century. The Church of the East also sent missions to Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and covered almost all of eastern Asia before the end of the ninth century.

The Church enjoyed alternate periods of rest and persecution after the move of the caliphate to Baghdad from Damascus in 752 AD. In around 780, the seat of the patriarch moved to Baghdad, the new capital of the Islamic empire, from Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The monks and clergy of the Assyrian Church served the royal court in the capacities of the court physicians and scribes. Many of the Greek works of philosophy were translated into Arabic by these Nestorian scholars; these works later were translated into Latin and found their way again into the West.



A Mongolian Bishop

Before the end of the first Christian millennium,

the Church of the East counted some 25 metropolitan sees and over 300 episcopal sees in all of the Near and Far East. The Church enjoyed a catholicity in which Assyrians, Turks, Mongols, Uigers, Arabs, Indians and Chinese were members of this glorious institution.

With the capture of Baghdad in 1258 by Hulagu Khan and the end of the Arab Muslim caliphate, the Christians of the royal city and the East in general enjoyed a period of rest and calm from persecution. The Christians hailed the entrance of the troops of Hulagu and his devoutly-Christian wife Tokuz Khatoun in the former capital of the caliphate as the dawn of a new age for Christendom. This royal couple was seen as the new 'Constantine and Helen' for the Christians living under Mongol rule. Countless monks, priests and deacons were to be found among the Mongol Christians, not to mention the tens of episcopal and metropolitan sees. In fact, in 1281 a Mongol monk Yahwalaha ('God has given') was elected to the highest ecclesiastical office of the Assyrian Church.

A Period of Survival and Decline

The Church entered a period of decline around the year 1400 with the persecutions and massacres of the Assyrian Christians of Iraq, Iran and Turkey under the Mongol warlord Tamur Lang. Upon capturing the capital of Baghdad in 1399, he began a campaign of murder and decimation of the Christian population of the region. Records tell of the massacre of hundreds of thousands of people: young and old, men and women. This caused the great majority of the Assyrian Christian populace to flee to the northern parts of Mesopotamia, in particular the region of modern-day Iraq, and find refuge among the mountainous caverns of the area. Nonetheless, theologians of the Church of the East continued their

However, Christianity already flourished among the Assyrians of northern



7th cen. Assyrian monastery of St. Hurmizd at Alqosh

Mesopotamia long before. Already by the early fourth century monasticism was well-established among the inhabitants of this region. In addition, churches were built and conversions in mass numbers were effected among the Assyrians by saints which are till this very day

venerated in this Church. In the Hakkari region of southeastern Turkey were to be found centuries-old churches, and it was here that the Christian Assyrians—for many others of them adopted other religions—found refuge.



1st Uniate Chaldean Patriarch John Sulaqa

Already by the mid 15th century the patriarchate was hereditary, being handed down from uncle to nephew; the majority of the metropolitan and episcopal sees were also hereditary. This caused a split in the Assyrian Church in the year 1552 when three bishops and the abbot of the St. Rabban Hurmizd monastery in Alqosh applied to Rome for help in electing a new patriarch. The abbot, John Sulaqa, reached Rome in 1553 and was ordained

patriarch by Pope Julius III. After having effected a schism in the Assyrian Church, the rival patriarch came back to Mesopotamia now styled the patriarch of the ‘Chaldeans’—a termed previously used for the uniate members of the Church of the East living in Cyprus who joined Rome in 1445 AD. From this point on, the missionary activity of the Latin West increased among the followers of the Church of the East in Mesopotamia, as well the adherents of the Assyrian Church in South India. By 1680, there were two patriarchates of the Church of the East, those of the Mar Elia line at Alqosh and the Mar Shimun line at Qudshanis, Turkey.

The Modern-Day Assyrians

Since the establishment of the second Church of the East patriarchate at Qudshanis, the mountain Assyrians of Turkey and those of the plain of Urmia



owed their allegiance to Mar Shimun. The patriarchal cathedral of Mar Shalita was completed in 1689 AD, and about a dozen bishops and metropolitans were in communion with this patriarch. In the meanwhile, the Mar Elia line of Alqosh ruled the Assyrians of the Nineveh plain and its environs. By 1830, the old Mar Elia line of

Alqosh became entirely Catholic and the sole 'Nestorian' patriarchate was ruled by the Mar Shimun dynasty.

With the advent of the First World War in 1914, the Assyrian Church and Nation suffered greatly at the hands of the Muslim powers of the day. In 1918, the catholicos-patriarch Mar Benjamin Shimun XXI (1887-1918) was martyred by the Kurdish chieftain Ismail Agha (Simko), and the Assyrians were left at the mercy of the Ottoman Turks and their Kurdish neighbors. With



the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, the Assyrians were left without a homeland of their own and the promises of the Western superpowers were forgotten and left unfulfilled. In 1918, the martyred patriarch Mar Benjamin was succeeded by his younger brother Mar Polos Shimun XXII, who was consecrated in the ancient church of St. Mary in Urmia. Mar Polos underwent a strenuous and unsettled tenure, as the condition of his people entering into the modern state of Iraq was dire and under the poorest of conditions. He died shortly thereafter at Baghdad, in 1920, having accompanied the Assyrian nation into Iraq during the great exodus of 1918-1920.

In 1920, the majority of the Assyrians were moved to the Bakuba Camp near Baghdad, being moved from Urmia, Iran. They lived in horrible, sub-human conditions; tens of thousands lost their lives along the way to Bakuba from 1918 to 1920.



Successively, the Assyrian people were able to recover themselves after the creation of the independent state of Iraq, however, without any claim to the land and home of their ancient ancestors. Later, in 1933 another wave of atrocities were perpetrated against the Assyrians of Iraq, this time on the part of the Iraqi monarchy. A group of Assyrians were forced to take refuge in the then-French colony of Syria. A confrontation with Iraqi forces caused the death of some few thousands of Assyrians. Those that crossed over were settled along the Khabur River. Today there are some 33 Assyrian villages along both banks of the Khabur River.



The Assyrians in the United States at this time were quite sparse, and number a few thousands in the whole country. The late Mar Eshai Shumun XXIII (1908-1975), patriarch of the Assyrian Church, was exiled along with the patriarchal household after the 1933 massacre and settled for a time on the island of Cyprus by the British. The patriarch then moved to the US, settling first in Chicago, in 1940. From then on, the seat of the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church would remain in the diaspora, until the patriarch's passing in 1975.

The early 1970's and 1990's—after the first Gulf War—saw a great wave of migration of Assyrians from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. These



migrations included the establishment of a large Assyrian diaspora predominantly in the United States and in the various countries of Europe as well. Outside the homeland, churches and cultural associations were established during this period. Various parishes were organized into dioceses and episcopal sees were established in the West for the first time. These communities continue to grow in number and affluence.

In 1975, the patriarchal see became vacant with the death of Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII. The Assyrian bishops gathered in London, England in 1976 and elected to the patriarchal throne Mar Dinkha, the then bishop of Iran; the new patriarch took the name of Mar Dinkha IV. The newly elected patriarch made immediate contact with the Assyrians living in the countries of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Lebanon soon after his election. The patriarchal see was moved to Chicago in 1980, where it remained until the demise of the late H.H. Mar Dinkha IV, who passed in March of 2015. With his passing, Mar Dinkha IV was the second patriarch to be laid to rest in the United States, being interred in Chicago, Illinois.

In June and September of 2015, the Holy Synod of the Assyrian Church of the East met in order to elect the new patriarch. The decision was made, in accord with the climate of the country, to return the patriarchal see to Iraq after a forced absence of some 83 years. Thus, on September 18, 2015 His Beatitude Mar Gewargis Sliwa,



the then-metropolitan of Iraq and Russia, was elected Catholicos-Patriarch to the apostolic see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The new patriarch was consecrated and enthroned on Sunday, September 27th at the church of St. John the Baptist in Ankawa, Erbil (KRG, Iraq), thus being elevated to the status of patriarchal cathedral. The new patriarch took the name Mar Gewargis III (the former two patriarchs with that name reigning in 661-680 and 828-831), and is the 121st successor of the apostles Mar Addai, Mar Mari and St. Thomas from the Twelve.

The Assyrian Church and Nation is a thriving community found in all the major cities of North America, numbering some 300,000. Assyrians have also settled in Europe and other parts of Asia. It is recorded that there is an Assyrian presence in at least 43 countries around the globe! Thus, the great majority of the Assyrians are to be found in the diaspora rather than in their ancestral homeland of Mesopotamia—modern-day Iraq. Centuries of persecution and forced migration have decimated the once-numerous populace; however the community continues to preserve its ancient history and heritage.

Today, the descendants of the ancient Assyrians who populated the ‘Cradle of Civilization’ are found all over the globe. Here in the U.S., they have proved to be integral part of the patchwork of nationalities and ethnic groups of which this great nation is comprised. The struggle for their nationalistic, cultural and religious rights in their homeland continues. Notwithstanding, the Assyrians are hopeful for a brighter and a more fair future; the ‘flickering light’ shall indeed not be extinguished!