



AN INTRODUCTION
to the
CHURCH OF THE EAST

by:
His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun



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His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII
Catholicos Patriarch of the East

The history of the Church of the East, which over many centuries comprised the major portion of Christianity, remained until recently almost unknown to the West, except for occasional accounts, such as that of Marco Polo, who traversed Asia in search of adventure and wealth. This was primarily due to the complete isolation which existed between the two branches of Christianity, Eastern and Western, both of which originated in the same source, namely, the Aramaic, a language of the Semitic group.

Inevitable historic and geographical reasons were partly to blame for this isolation. But the most important factor in the total ignorance of Western Christianity as to the history and accomplishments of this Church of Asia, was the cruel and selfish policy adopted toward it by the Roman-Byzantine emperors and their successors, whose imperialist religion the Church of the East refused to follow, and who therefore branded it with the misnomer "Nestorian." This, together with the eclipse prevailing over

Europe during the Dark and Middle Ages, completed the picture of separation.

It is only during the last century or so, especially in this generation through the writings of various Protestant missionaries, travellers and secular historians, that the West has finally become aware of the existence of the Church of Asia. Arnold J. Toynbee, in his outstanding work, "The History of Civilization," has shed further light on the amazing achievements of the Church of the East, not only because of its missionary enterprise and great contributions in the scientific field, but especially as the bearer of the torch of the Syriac civilization, and champion against the Hellenistic onslaught. That torch, which the oppressed and persecuted Church of the East was unable to bear any longer, with the rise of Mohammed was taken over by Islam and carried on to a victorious end with the final expulsion of Hellenistic influence from the Middle East. Thus, in this special field, where the Church of the East had failed, because of its lack of political support, Islam had succeeded. Nevertheless, it is one of the mysteries of the Divine Providence that the descendants of the heathen Assyrians, from whom the Greeks largely borrowed their civilization and culture, would now as Christians stand in the gap against Hellenistic cultural encroachment.

STARTING POINT

The beginning of the Church of the East is coincident with the earthly ministry of our

Lord. King Abgar, sovereign of the little state of Oshroene, with its capital known as Orhai or Edessa, in the northwest of Mesopotamia, believed in Christ and His mission. The Assyrian people, therefore, speaking the Aramaic language (the language spoken by Jesus and His apostles, and in which the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament were written), can rightly claim the honour of being immediately next to the small band of Galileans as followers of our Lord, in their conversion to the "Haymanutha Mshikhayta," the faith of the Anointed One.

This common bond, and the exchange of ideas, traditions and customs between the ancient Assyrians and the Hebrews, enabled the Assyrians to accept and appreciate the Christian Faith in a manner that was not possible by non-Aramaic speaking peoples. Because of this, the unequalled zeal and missionary expansion of this Church of Asia, which to this day has preserved in its purity the Apostolic Faith and traditions of the early Church, can be readily understood.

The Church of the East, as this branch of Aramaic speaking Christianity came to be known, was officially founded by the Apostles, Mar Patros (St. Peter), Mar Toma (St. Thomas), Mar Addai (St. Thaddeus) and Mar Mari of the seventy disciples. St. Thaddeus was sent by St. Thomas to the City of Edessa immediately after the resurrection, thereby fulfilling the promise made to King Abgar by our Lord himself.

The City of Arbil (Erbella) in Assyria also shares the glory with Edessa as the starting

point of Eastern Christianity. Among its early Patriarchs, three of them were related to Mart Maryam (The Lady Mary) the Holy Virgin, and Mar Yosip (St. Joseph), her righteous spouse. It was the Church within the Persian Empire and therefore remained unaffected by the many theological disputes, schisms and heresies that in later centuries arose within the imperial Christianity of the Roman Empire, and which, for the most part, were dictated by personal ambitions and animosities among the various prelates and unceasing struggle for power between the Latin and Greek Churches.

However, the endless persecutions this ancient Church suffered, first from the heathens, and later under various Islamic rulers, reduced it greatly in numbers and finally scattered its children into many lands. It must, however, be said in fairness to both the Persians and Islamic rule that at various periods the Church enjoyed a great measure of tolerance, both under the rule of the Sapers and Arab Khalifs; perhaps more so than any of those other religions could have enjoyed in a reversed role under the Byzantine Emperors or the Western Christian rule of the Middle Ages. The following charter, given to the Church of the East in Arabia by Mohammed himself, is an example of the fact. The heads of the Christians of Najran, in Arabia, led by their ruler, Saeed, along with their Bishop, Eshoyab ("Given by Jesus"), paid an official visit to Mohammed (whom they refer to as "the prophet of Tayaye, a leading Arab tribe) and on the occa-

sion Mohammed gave the Church in Arabia the following charter of Protection:

"He commanded the Tayaye (Arab) that they must protect the Mshikhaye (Christians) from all harm, and must not oblige them to go out with them to fight, nor must they try to change their customs and their laws. He moreover, exhorted his followers to help the Christians repair their churches whenever such a need may arise; and if any of his followers has a Christian wife, he should not oblige her to leave her faith and that he should not prevent her from fasting and prayer and all other obligations of her faith, these and many other similar rules or protection . . ."

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Similar charters of protection were given from time to time by the Khalifs to the Church of the East.

The persecutions which did occur were in fact for the most part caused by the political ambitions of Constantine and his successors, and the later by the various Crusaders, who in the name of the Cross of Christ, carved out their ambitious territorial expansions and plundered the Middle East. At the same time a covetous eye was constantly directed at the great Christian Church of the East, and no

