

Friends of the Church of the East (Assyrian)



His Beatitude

Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, Patriarch of the Church of the East 119

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After the fall of the Assyrian Empire a large number of Assyrians consisting of noblemen, princes, government officials, and military men, escaped the onslaught of the Babylonian and Persian Armies, and took refuge in the fastness of the mountains of Khurdistan about 70 miles north of Nineveh. These, and the native inhabitants of these mountains, maintained their independence, and escaped the later conquests of the realms of Persia, Greece, and Rome. This miraculous escape was due to the mountain barriers which formed a natural defense. No conqueror ever dared to invade this area and to subdue the remnant of the once mighty Assyrian Empire. Nevertheless, the Assyrians in the Mesopotamian lowland were subjugated by the Babylonians and Persians, and in southern provinces lost their national and racial characteristics and in the process of time became intermingled with other races. But in the lands north of Nineveh (Mosul) the Assyrians, even though subject to foreign rulers, continued to preserve their identity, language, and cultural life.

The evangelization among the Assyrians began in the early part of the first century A. D. After the resurrection of our Lord, his disciples went to neighboring countries around Galilee and Syria where they preached the gospel and established churches. Racial, lingual, and geographical facilities made it easier for the apostles to approach these people. Edessa, a Syrian city northwest of Mesopotamia, is only a short distance from Galilee and Judea. A strong evangelical centre was organized in this ancient city from which missionaries went to Persia, India, China, Turkestan, and other parts of the East. Hence this church is historically known as the church of the East, and its Patriarch still bears that title. The term "Assyrian church" is, therefore, historically incorrect. The church was founded by St. Thaddeus, one of the twelve, and Mari, one of the seventy. Later the city was visited by St. Thomas on his journey to India.

In the third century A. D. the church was so strong in Mesopotamia, and Persia, that its rapid progress and triumph was considered a menace to pagan religion which was the state religion in Persia. A large number of Persian

noblemen were converted to Christianity and as a result of this, persecutions were instigated by pagan priests, which lasted for many centuries, and to some extent weakened the strength of the church and hampered its progress in the Persian Empire. But in India and China, the work of the gospel was spreading so rapidly that by the eighth century A. D. a number of Christian missions were established in the heart of China, Mongolia, and Korea.

During the rise of Islam, in the seventh century A. D., this ancient church faced its most difficult struggle for life, for it stood as a buffer between the Mohammedans and the Christians in the West. Being cut off from the rest of Christendom and surrounded by Mohammedans and because of persecutions and restrictions, the church lost its contacts with its foreign missions in China and India. The most severe persecutions occurred during the invasion of Mesopotamia by Tamerlane and Genghis-Khan. The entire Mesopotamian lowlands were laid waste; cities burned, churches destroyed, and trees cut down. Neither the church nor the country has recovered from this terrible disaster.

On the other hand, the Assyrians in the mountain districts of Khurdistan maintained their tribal independence, religion, language, customs, and manners, under the leadership of their Patriarch who was both their spiritual and temporal leader. About a century ago their existence was finally made known to the English speaking people through the American and English missionaries. This portion of the church was cut off from the main body of the church in Persia and Mesopotamia and from the missions in China and India.

Thanks are due to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission of help, sent at the time through an appeal made by the Assyrian Patriarch. The object of this mission was to render assistance to a sister church, in order to maintain its ancient faith and other sacred institutions, which were jealously preserved from the earliest centuries.

In 1914, the Assyrians, because of their friendly relations with the Anglican church, and their love for the British people, threw in their lot on the side of the Allies, and for nearly three years fought the Turkish and Khurdish armies. When the Imperial Russian forces in Persia collapsed, the Assyrians were left alone to face many Turkish divisions and large armies of Khurdish mercenaries. Being surrounded on all sides by their natural enemies, and with ammunition and supplies exhausted, the Assyrians made a daring

attempt to reach British lines in Mesopotamia. The Assyrian Army, composed of tribesmen, broke through the centre of the Turkish and Khurdish lines, clearing the way for thousands of women and children to march southward, trekking on foot, through unfamiliar and difficult terrain, facing numerous enemies and hostile elements. Thousands of women and children perished on the way; some were killed, others sick and exhausted, fell by the roadside; hunger and disease played havoc with the rest. Only a small portion of these people reached the British lines. Even this small remnant is still in a precarious condition, facing extinction. They are still a people without a home, waiting to be settled. Their ancient homes were given to Turkey. Their number has been decreasing rapidly since the war.

The League of Nations and British authorities have made futile attempts to preserve this small remnant of these people which is still in Iraq and Syria. It is feared that if they are not settled soon, they are doomed to perish. The death rate has been high. The Assyrians being mainly a pastoral and agricultural people, cannot survive in the Arabian Desert amid the adverse climatic conditions.

It is also feared that because of the lack of sacred literature, schools, and other means, these people will forget their language and religion, and as a result, become Mohammedans, as thousands of others did centuries ago.

The part which the Assyrians played in the last war and subsequently in serving Great Britain in its campaign in Mesopotamia has aroused the unwarranted hatred and suspicion of Moslem neighbours in Mesopotamia. In consequence, yet another systematic massacre occurred again in August of 1933 less than a year after Great Britain had relinquished its mandate over Iraq. Some hundreds of unarmed men, women and children, and a number of priests were massacred in cold blood. This put an end to the great effort made in establishing schools and churches through the small but generous help rendered by the Episcopal Church in America. The solution of the Assyrian problem was then relegated to the League of Nations, but unfortunately, all efforts to find a home outside Iraq failed.

The present European situation has made further attempts impossible. Thus their situation remains a precarious one. The Assyrians are scattered in Iraq, Syria, Persia, Russia, and the happy portion in the United States of America. We do not know what the future has in store for them, but we are naturally exceedingly anxious as to how

the present war is going to effect them. However, what we are at present chiefly concerned about, is the unhappy situation that the portion of the church in Syria and Iraq is faced with.

Among the portion of the church on the river Khabur (a tributary of the river Euphrates) our priests, deacons, laymen, and a few women teachers, have been carrying on voluntarily a number of schools for both sexes in which there are at present some six hundred scholars. This work has been carried on under the most difficult conditions. The schools lack books and other school materials, and the teachers who devote their time to this work are unpaid. An eye witness reported to the Patriarch that he found in one of the schools where the teachers for lack of means were teaching the beginners by writing the alphabet on the ground.

The chief object of these schools is to preserve and maintain this ancient church, its sacred Christian faith, and the Aramaic language, the language which Christ spoke, which was also the language of the early Christian church. It is for this faith and the principle it stands for that we have sacrificed our national entity, our homes, our hearths, our churches, and all that we most value in this life. Therefore, it is for the preservation of these things that I earnestly appeal as the head of this ancient church and people to the generosity of our Christian brethren in the United States of America, a people who have done so much in educational and humanitarian matters for the world at large.

Unless urgent financial help is forthcoming, even these schools can no longer carry on and the result will be tragic. This ancient church through its history and its missionary enterprise has a great deal to contribute to the expanding life of the ecumenical Church.

An annual sum of \$15,000 to \$20,000 would not only save the present situation, but would in due course improve it vastly. This being so, my church and myself are confident that we will have your sympathy and support .

Checks should be made to the **Assyrian Church Fund**, and addressed to the Rev. William E. Patterson, Secretary, Bar Harbor, Maine.

Officers of The Assyrian Church Fund

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Literature on the Assyrian Church and People:

The Assyrian Church by Canon W. A. Wigram D. D.
The Assyrians and Their Neighbors by Canon W. A. Wigram, D. D.
The Cradle of Mankind by Canon W. C. Wigram, D. D.
A Church on Fire (Nesorian Missionary Enterprise) by James Stuart
Assyrian Church Customs and the Murder of Marshim, by Lady Surma d. Marshim. Published by Faith Press, London, England.

Patriarch's address in America is Century Club, 7 West 43rd St., New York City, N. Y.
August 30, 1940.